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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

A Rhetoric of Reading Contemporary Canadian Narratives: George Bowering, Margaret Atwood, and Robert Kroetsch

BY

©

W. F. Garrett-Petts

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Edmonton, Alberta
Spring, 1992

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *A Rhetoric Reading Contemporary Canadian Narratives: George Bowering, Margaret Atwood, and Robert Kroetsch* here submitted by W.F. Garrett-Petts in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues for a rhetoric of reading to complement the rapid developments in text-oriented poetics that, despite a renewed interest in audience and process, continue to dominate contemporary critical discourse. A rhetoric of reading shifts the focus of critical attention from texts as aesthetic objects to texts as interactive elements in the "contextualized production and reception of meaning." This particular variation on a celebrated critical theme (that of discourse as *énunciation*) belongs to Linda Hutcheon, and this thesis constitutes both an elaboration and a critique of Hutcheon's critical stance.

If Hutcheon is right in her assertion that postmodernist narratives and theory teach us the rhetorical commonplace that discourse is language as *énunciation*, then the reading of such narratives inevitably provokes questions of rhetorical response. Contemporary authors, especially Canadian writers such as George Bowering, Margaret Atwood, and Robert Kroetsch, seem to demand such a response as a way of overthrowing the reading conventions of realism. The "new" reading conventions promise a collaborative, dialogic experience; and, perhaps more importantly, they promise to shift critical attention from a focus on form to a focus on process -- from the domain of poetics to the domain of rhetoric.

A poetics of postmodernism tethered to a realist episteme raises the question of the reading process only to ignore it, ruling exploration of the reader's mind *ultra vires*. A rhetoric of reading, on the other hand, must offer both an analysis of reading processes and a way of conceptualizing the rhetorical situations within which such processes occur. Toward that end, this thesis begins with an historical review of rhetoric's relation to poetics. Chapters One and Two explore the relation of rhetoric to contemporary reading theory, with special attention to the notion of reading as both trope and argument. Chapter Three extends the discussion through a consideration of the history of realism and realist reading practices in Canada; and Chapters Four, Five, and Six focus on the importance of reading as argument and trope in George Bowering's *Burning Water* and *Caprice*, in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and in Robert Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said*. The thesis concludes that poetics alone cannot account for the notion of reading as a dialogue between writer and reader; only a rhetoric of reading, which, by definition, focuses on both the suasory power of discourse and the interrelationship among *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* can speak directly to the issue of reading postmodern narratives.

The "new rhetoricians" (Bowering, Atwood, and Kroetsch) ask us to reconsider our traditional epistemological assumptions about story, character, and the process of interpretive reading. Each of these authors writes novels that dramatize the notion of literature as both transaction and event: they help us understand and resolve questions regarding the nature of, and possibilities for, collaboration; the political responsibilities of defining oneself in the process of reading and writing; and the new consciousness of oral discourse and of reading as a kind of ongoing conversation.

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INTRODUCTION

Preface To A Rhetoric Of Reading[1]

In calling for a "rhetoric of reading," this study seeks to shift the current focus of critical attention away from texts as aesthetic objects to texts as interactive elements in the "contextualized production and reception of meaning" (Hutcheon, *Narcissistic* xv). This particular variation on a celebrated critical theme (that of discourse as *énonciation*) belongs to Linda Hutcheon, and, in a sense, what follows here constitutes both an elaboration and a critique of Hutcheon's critical stance. In the "Preface to the Paperback Edition" of *Narcissistic Narrative*: *The Metafictional Paradox*, Hutcheon announces her intention to begin to describe "the 'poetics' of what we seem determined to call postmodernism" (xi). Poetics she defines as "that ever developing theoretical structure by which we order both our aesthetic knowledge and our critical procedures" (xi); and she sees the development of that poetics as dependent on textual innovations rather than on changing conventions of audience response: "The course of literary history is being altered, and, as always, it is being altered by texts, not the critics" (39).

Hutcheon's procedure here is primarily inductive: she seeks theory from within, just as in her second book, *A Theory of Parody*, she seeks to avoid "any theoretical structure imposed from without" (116). A focus on texts, of course, keeps the theorist's feet close to the ground, and I sympathize with Hutcheon's intention to keep her discussion as specific and practical as possible. But throughout both *Narcissistic Narrative* and *A Theory*, the author's claims are threatened by the limitations of her approach. *Narcissistic Narrative* attempts to delimit the term "metafiction" by treating it as "a technically definable literary entity" (2), as a set of "new literary phenomena" (39). Similarly, her definition of parody (which subsumes metafiction) proceeds in terms of rigorous analysis and textual taxonomy of contemporary postmodernist texts. However, in the final chapter of *A Theory*, Hutcheon comes close to conceding the impossibility of fixing postmodernist genres in tidy, textually-defined categories:

> Since I believe that there are no completely transhistorical definitions of parody possible, it follows that the social or "worldly" status of parody can also never be fixed or finally and permanently defined. (115)

Thus, while Hutcheon treats metafiction and parody as postmodernist examples of "process made visible" (*Narcissistic* 6), and while she claims that in "postmodernist art . . . its form remains to activate in the reader or viewer that collective participation that enables something closer to active 'performance' to replace the 'well-wrought urn' of modernist closure" (*A Theory* 99), she must admit finally that what "is needed here is a broader notion of the conventions of reading" (*A Theory* 116). For Hutcheon, however, conventions of reading are derivable "from the teachings of the texts themselves" (116).

If, as she says, postmodernist literary forms "require a certain institutionalized set of values--both aesthetic (generic) and social (ideological)--in order to be understood, or even to exist" (*A Theory* 95), then texts are not a matter of "process made visible"; rather, it is the texts that are made "visible" through the process of reading. Hutcheon's perception of the text as the concretization of institutional values and processes effectively cuts off serious consideration of those forces as anything more than extensions of the text. There are alternatives, however. As Jane Tompkins concludes in her thought-provoking article, "The

Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response," if we take seriously the theoretical assertion "that perceptual categories define the world and give reality the only shape it can ever have, then a shift of critical emphasis would seem to be in order, a shift away from the analysis of individual texts and toward an investigation of what it is that makes texts visible in the first place" (225-26). Tompkins is surely right in claiming that interpretation is not the only game in town, but we would be wrong to conclude that interpretation has become an anachronism inevitably tied to formalist critical practice. The desire to achieve coherence, to understand meaning, remains basic to human nature and, as I shall argue later, lies at the heart of the reading process itself. We interpret because we are interested in understanding as precisely as possible what others have to say. We interpret to develop and maintain the very perceptual categories we use to make sense of the world. What we need, therefore, is an expanded definition of interpretation that includes both the text's poetics and its surrounding rhetorical context. Indeed, Hutcheon says as much when she acknowledges in the Preface to her recent book, *A Poetics of Postmodernism,* "I realized that the formalist and pragmatic approaches I had used in the other two studies would need expanding to include historical and ideological considerations . . ." (x).

A Poetics of Postmodernism goes a long way toward articulating the kinds of questions that need answering: How do we define textuality? interpretation? theory? From what position can we theorize? How does postmodernism challenge our dominant, liberal humanist preconceptions? How do we read? Postmodernist art and theory, Hutcheon suggests, must be situated within two key contexts: "first, within the enunciative act itself, and, second, within the broader historical, social, and political (as well as intertextual) context implied by the act and in which both theory and practice take root" (75). While one might argue that the two "contexts" are, at least in practice, inseparable, the logic of her new position remains persuasive. Investigating the "enunciative act itself," the *processes* of writing and reading, constitutes an essential aspect of reader-response to postmodernist literature. However, throughout a good portion of *A Poetics*, Hutcheon contradicts her theoretical premise and deals with "the enunciative act" not as a process, but as a product in which enunciation is thematized and both producer and receiver of the text are considered "essential constitutive factors of the text" (81). Having invoked the social dimension of empirical readers and writers, Hutcheon turns around and treats reading and writing as acts encoded within the text. Similarly, in a single paragraph, Hutcheon moves from a call for a non-structuralist definition of "poetics" to a valorization of Tzvetan Todorov's claim that "[l]iterature is inconceivable outside a typology of discourses" (qtd. in *A Poetics* 14).

With the publication of *The Politics of Postmodernism*, the whole question of reader theory and reading practices has become at best incidental to her frame of inquiry. Though her focus on politics and ideology presents an enhanced account of the forces which affect postmodernist representation, she remains silent on the crucial issue of how texts are received. Her promise, in *Narcissistic Narrative* and *A Theory*, to explore the topics of process, reader participation, and "a broader notion of the conventions of reading," remains unfulfilled.

The limitations and contradictions of Hutcheon's extended thesis are inherent in her concern to establish a "poetics" of postmodernism.[2] She is justified in arguing that "the art forms of our century have been extremely and self-consciously didactic" (*A Theory* 3), but she is misguided in presenting her case as though poetics alone can account adequately for the implications of postmodernism's didactic purpose. Traditionally, the art best suited to the study of audience and persuasion has been rhetoric. Indeed, as a brief historical review of rhetoric's relation to poetics illustrates, the dynamics of postmodernist reading are primarily rhetorical and only incidentally poetic--especially in the age of the "New Rhetoric."

Rhetoric and Poetics

Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, the inspiration for later classical works by Cicero, Quintilian, Horace and St. Augustine, begins with the powerful assertion that rhetoric "is the counterpart of dialectic" (1). Similarly, Aristotle offers the *Rhetoric* as a companion piece to his *Poetics*: readers of the *Poetics* are referred to the *Rhetoric* for discussion of *dianoia*, the art of framing speeches; "the Rhetoric refers us to the Poetics for a discussion of matters that are more fully dealt with" (Cooper, *Rhetoric* xviii), including discussion of grammar, diction, and style. The alliance of the two works, *Poetics* (with its focus on formal characteristics) and the *Rhetoric* (with its focus on the effect of form on audience), provides a comprehensive and influential program of study: "for many centuries to come the discussion of poetic diction was dominated by the criteria of good and bad style which Aristotle had established in the *Rhetoric*; as for . . . character sketches, we find them as early as Horace bodily transferred from *Rhetoric* to *Poetics*" (Solmsen, "Introduction" xiii). For Aristotle, rhetoric was above all a study of audience based upon "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (1). If the *Poetics* presented a theory of structures, the *Rhetoric* provided the necessary supplement, a theory of processes (of "means").[3]

Given Hutcheon's persistent attempt to define a poetics in terms of formal features, we should note that, for Aristotle, "the distinction between the diction of public address and the diction of drama or epic, between prose style and poetic style, was not . . . fundamental" (Baldwin, *Ancient Rhetoric* 1). More important to ancient philosophy was the question of human purpose and convention: "Rhetoric and poetic connoted two fields of composition, two habits of conceiving and ordering, two typical movements" (Baldwin 3). Genre was not (and is not) a property of texts but of social conventions. When we move forward, however, into the medieval and renaissance periods, rhetorical definitions of discourse become harder to find.

As C.S. Baldwin observes, the status of rhetoric was affected by changes in relations among the *trivium* of liberal arts -- rhetoric, grammar, and logic (Baldwin 151-53). The history of rhetoric may be thought of as a story of misapplications and extensions: in the middle ages, poetics constitutes a misapplication of rhetoric to style, while *ars dictaminis* (the art of letter writing) and *artes praedicandi* (the arts of preaching) constitute pragmatic extensions of rhetorical theory (Baldwin 191-95). After the twelfth century, rhetoric's theoretical relevance deteriorated even further. It ceased to be taught as a liberal art, and it retained practical relevance only in the form of epideictic oratory. Classically, of course, rhetoric consisted of five related departments: invention, disposition, style, memory, and delivery. By the sixteenth century, and with the publication of Peter Ramus' influential *Rhetorica*, rhetoric was divorced from dialectic and the province of rhetoric was accordingly reduced to *elocutio* and *pronunciatio*, style and delivery. Similarly rhetoric and poetics parted company. As Rosemond Tuve notes, "in so far as they were arts of thought, poetry [the focus of poetics] and rhetoric had not been divided prior to Ramus" (*Elizabethan* 339); after the sixteenth century, the increasing propensity to Balkanize the three liberal arts laid the groundwork for our modern notion of rhetoric and poetics as discrete branches of inquiry. Rhetorical definitions of discourse were soon relegated to handbooks on style as, more and more, words became objectified "ornaments" to be arranged and admired. Language became regarded less as a vehicle of human communication and more as an object of aesthetic contemplation.[4]

Twentieth-century notions of rhetoric are significantly different from Aristotle's formulation. Though the importance of persuasion remains central, the field of rhetoric has recently held that a text cannot be read or understood in isolation from a context of audience response. The "New Rhetoric" rejects notions of textual autonomy, considering it the hypothetical construct of a naive poetics that threatens to separate discourse (especially literary discourse) from the world of human interaction, motives, and fallibility. I. A. Richards argues that meaning "floats upon a primitive raft of consents" (*Speculative* 4) and declares in his *Philosophy of Rhetoric* that rhetoric "should be a study of misunderstanding and its remedies" (3); Donald Bryant argues that rhetoric "is primarily concerned with the relations of ideas to the thoughts, feeling, motives, and behavior of men" ("Function" 412). In "Rhetoric--Old and New," published in 1951, Kenneth Burke characterizes the shift in the conception of rhetoric in the following terms:

> If I had to sum up in one word the difference between the 'old' rhetoric and a 'new' (a rhetoric re-invigorated by fresh insights which the 'New Science' contributed to the subject), I would reduce it to this: The key term for the old rhetoric was 'persuasion' and its stress upon deliberate design. The key term for the new rhetoric would be '*identification*,' which can include a partially 'unconscious' factor in appeal. (203)

Rhetorical discourse thus defined becomes more than inducement to action; rhetoric becomes the study of human relations, of the means of identification and consubstantiation. As Burke explains in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, "You persuade a man only insofar as you talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his" (55). The New Rhetoric, then, accentuates the dynamics of human relations as men and women reach out, attempting to communicate, interpret, understand, and identify in an ever-shifting social, ideological, and linguistic environment. For ours is an age of uncertainty and indeterminacy. As Christine Brooke-Rose puts it in *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*,

> After Einstein's equivalence of matter and energy, after de Broglie's dual nature of particle and light wave, after Planck's demonstration that the energy is emitted in discontinuous quanta, and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle which replaced the determinism of classic physics with a state of probability and randomness, and showed that observable phenomena are affected by the instrument observing them, a certain tolerance

> of ambiguity was introduced into science, and man is now faced with a philosophy of indeterminacy and a multivalent logic. (7)

While such uncertainty has no place in, say, the realist's view of reality, the rhetorician would treat uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts as an understandable response to a world where uncertainty must be acknowledged and accommodated. In the words of Donald Bryant, rhetoric "exists . . . because a world of certainty is not the world of human affairs" (407); and as James Berlin continues,

> For the New Rhetoric, knowledge is not simply a static entity available for retrieval. Truth is dynamic and dialectical, the result of a process involving the interaction of opposing elements. It is a relation that is created, not pre-existent and waiting to be discovered. ("Contemporary Composition" 774)

For many readers, I suspect, there is little here in the "New Rhetoric" that appears particularly startling or "new."[5] Rhetorical notions of knowledge and reality as dialectical constructs, although not universally accepted, have become so ubiquitous (especially in the writings of post-structuralist thinkers) that their relationship to rhetoric itself has become almost invisible. But while such seemingly diverse writers as Arthur Whitehead, Susanne Langer, Michael Polanyi, Michel Foucault, Thomas Kuhn, and Hayden White may seem to share little more than a plurality of textual strategies,[6] the principles of the New Rhetoric nonetheless suggest a controlling intellectual field:

> When taken together, writer, reality, audience, and language identify an epistemic field--the basic conditions that determine what knowledge will be knowable, what not knowable, and how the knowable will be communicated . . . . *In Science and the Modern World* . . . A.N. Whitehead sees this field as a product of the "fundamental assumptions which adherents of all variant systems within the epoch unconsciously presuppose . . . . Susanne Langer, in *Philosophy in a New Key* , . . . calls it the "tacit, fundamental way of seeing things" . . . . Michael Polanyi uses the terms "tacit knowledge" in *Personal Knowledge* . . . . Michel Foucault, in *The Order of Things* , . . . speaks of the "episteme," and Thomas Kuhn, in

> *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* , . . . discusses at length the "paradigm" that underlies a scientific discipline. The historian Hayden White, in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, . . . has translated the elements of the composing process into terms appropriate to the writing of history, seeing the historical field as being made up of the historian, the historical record, the historical accounts, and an audience. (Berlin, "Contemporary Composition" 767)

Similarly, reader-oriented critics, from Umberto Eco to Stanley Fish, reveal a sensitivity to the function of texts within "an epistemic field," though it must be noted that, like Hutcheon, many contemporary theorists follow the example of the so-called New Critics before them and continue to privilege one point of the rhetorical triangle at the expense of the triangle as a whole. Just as the New Critical banishment of the author and the reader effectively restricted the classical rhetorical focus on *ethos* (the author), *logos* (the word), and *pathos* (the audience) to *logos* alone, so recent theory seems intent upon viewing literature as a static, aesthetic product, rather than as a dynamic, interactive process of communication. Whenever a text is stripped of its pragmatic function as language in use, it becomes abstracted from human motives and relations, and understood only in terms of its own internal structure (its "poetics"). Deconstructive and reader-oriented approaches, which generally continue a text-centred focus, do not fully engage the rhetorical imperative implicit in their developing poetics. Or, as Jane Tompkins explains it,

> What is most striking about reader-response criticism and its close relative, deconstructive criticism, is their failure to break out of the mold into which critical writing was cast by the formalist identification of criticism with explication. Interpretation reigns supreme both in teaching and in publication just as it did when New Criticism was in its heyday in the 1940s and 1950s. In the long perspective of critical history, virtually nothing has changed as a result of what seems, from close up, the cataclysmic shift in the locus of meaning from the text to the reader. Professors and students alike practice criticism as usual; only the vocabulary with which they perform their analyses has altered. ("The Reader" 224-25)

But just as New Critical inquiry could not in practice avoid (however parenthetically) discussion of the reader, so the potential for reconciliation between rhetoric and poetics has always been imminent. As Donald Bryant notes, though "sporadically the effect of critics and theorists has been to keep *rhetoric* and *poetic* apart, the two rationales have had an irresistible tendency to come together, and their similarities may well be more important than their differences" (424). The rising interest in reader aesthetics, a phenomenon Elizabeth Freund has called "the return of the reader " (13), changes the dynamics of literary criticism and makes the division between poetics and rhetoric all the more difficult to maintain. As long as the focus remains on the structure of the text, rather than on the dynamics of its production and reception, literary analysis can focus on poetics alone. But the "more we speculate about the effect of a . . . literary work on an audience the more we become involved in metaphysical questions in which rhetoric must be involved" (Bryant 423). In many ways the reading of postmodernist texts provides the ideal occasion for the re-involvement of rhetoric.

The Need for a Rhetoric of Reading

If Linda Hutcheon is right in her assertion that postmodernist narratives and theory teach us the rhetorical commonplace "that discourse is language as *énonciation*, involving, that is, the contextualized production and reception of meaning" (*Narcissistic* xv), then the reading of such narratives inevitably provokes questions of rhetorical response. Contemporary authors, especially Canadian writers such as Robert Kroetsch, seem to demand such a response as a way of overthrowing the reading conventions of realism. "I'm interested in sharing with the reader the fact that I'm making a fiction," says Kroetsch:

> One of the assumptions of old-style realism is that the novel isn't a fiction. Verisimilitude, the textbooks demand. And I'm no longer interested in that. I want the reader to be engaged

> with me in fiction making. I work a reader pretty hard . . . in that I want him to enter the process with me. Some writers fill in all the spaces, or they use all the conventions. They give all the details. I like the sense of process being fluid and open. (Hancock 42)

Kroetsch's rhetorical position asks a great deal of his readers: he asks us to divest ourselves of old reading habits and to enter the process of fiction making. The "new" reading conventions promise a collaborative, dialogic experience; and, perhaps more importantly, they promise to shift critical attention from form to process--from the domain of poetics to the domain of rhetoric. Once this shift is accepted as a context for reading, conventional notions of the reader's role, of character, and of the author's function as an intentional force also change. Instead of regarding narratives as autonomous mimetic entities, we are asked to abandon our conventional "realist" presuppositions about fiction and recognize the extent to which author, text, and reader collaborate in the production of literary meaning. Few would argue that form does not contribute toward our understanding of either character or the reader's possible relationships with the text and the author; what Kroetsch and others seem to be saying is that form's function must always remain subordinate to the rhetorical context of its reading. Form becomes "open" or "closed" according to the conventions of its production and reception, and it can only be said to shape those conventions after the fact.

Hutcheon's poetics, on the other hand, raises the question of process only to ignore it, ruling exploration of the reader's mind *ultra vires.* But as I shall explore in chapter 1, understanding the ascendency of process over product, a proposition so fundamental to cognitive and social constructivist theories of reading both literary and non-literary discourse, remains crucial to understanding the rhetorical stance of many contemporary Canadian writers.

What follows is not intended as a rhetoric of postmodernism, for, as Hutcheon's treatment of postmodernist poetics has already outlined, the conventions of postmodernism range far beyond the reading of texts, into the realm of visual arts, film, architecture, history and philosophy. My own objectives are more modest: to explore the linguistic and social processes that make the reading of postmodernist narratives possible. The focus on narrative--especially the novel--has become a principle preoccupation for those investigating questions of postmodernism in literature. Matei Calinescu, for example, argues that postmodernism's perceived tendency to frustrate or problematize meaning is more obvious (and more novel) in prose than in poetry. While ambiguity and obscurity may be commonplace in poetry, "[I]n prose," says Calinescu, "particularly after the powerful assertion of social and psychological realism in the nineteenth century, there was little room for undecidability of a structural kind" (299). Thus questions central to postmodernist writing "are endowed with more urgency in contemporary prose than in poetry" (299). Similarly, Hutcheon, associating postmodernism with a Longinian concern for process, speculates that "it is narrative as a whole, and not just literary narrative that has progressed into a process-oriented mode" (*Narcissistic* 7). In her article "From Poetic to Narrative Structures," Hutcheon continues her line of argument, suggesting that "narrative perhaps provides a more appropriate and extended vehicle than the lyric for the aesthetic and moral exploration of the tensions between process and product" (17). Again, the discussion privileges narrative over poetry and drama. But there is yet another reason to feature narrative: not only is it today the preeminent mode of literary discourse, but it is the mode that best dramatizes the rise of the reader and reader aesthetics. Where once Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg could propose the elegant definition of narrative as works distinguished by "the presence of a story and a story-teller" (*The Nature* 4), the distinguishing feature of postmodernist narrative is the sudden and profound inclusion of the audience as an essential constituent of what might be called the rhetorical triangle of postmodernist narrative.

In the pages that follow, I argue for a "rhetoric of reading" to complement the rapid developments in text-oriented poetics that, despite a renewed interest in audience and process, continue to dominate contemporary critical discourse. Specifically, I shall focus on recent attempts to taxonomize and respond to the narratives of Robert Kroetsch and two of his most notable contemporaries, George Bowering and Margaret Atwood. Much of my initial attention, especially in chapter 1, will be directed toward a more complete understanding of the poetics put forward by Hutcheon in *Narcissistic Narrative* and *The Theory of Parody* (and extended more recently in *A Poetics of Postmodernism, The Canadian Postmodern, The Politics of Postmodernism*, and *Splitting Images*). Hutcheon's contributions distinguish her as one of Canada's foremost authorities on reading theory and postmodernism. Certainly her synthesis of Umberto Eco's "opera aperta" (a structural "poetics" of open and closed forms) and Wolfgang Iser's hermeneutics (showing how empirical readers become "implied readers" and thus fulfill the formal demands of the text) points toward the kind of rapproachment between poetics and rhetoric that must occur if we are to achieve a fuller understanding of how we read postmodernist texts. As I hope to show in the course of this study, the considerable challenges presented by Hutcheon's theorizing and the narratives of writers such as Bowering, Atwood, and Kroetsch require a collaborative rhetorical response from their readers. These Canadian writers reach out, seeking to engage us in a dialogue about the interrelated nature of authors, texts, and readers. bpNichol calls this new rhetorical dimension of reading part of a "new humanism" that, as Stephen Scobie notes so eloquently, "is simultaneously a celebration of the 'human community' in its most personal form, and a linguistic manifesto, in which linguistic inability is seen as the condition of our lives" (*bpNichol* 28).[7] Nichol's "Statement," first published in 1966, reads,

> now that we have reached the point where people have finally come to see that language means communication and that communication does not just mean language, we have come up against the problem, the actual fact, of diversification, of finding as many exits as possible from the self (language/communication exits) in order to form as many entrances as possible for the other . . . .
>
> there is a new humanism afoot that will one day touch the world to its core. traditional poetry is only one of the means by which to reach out and touch the other. the other is emerging as the necessary prerequisite for dialogues with the self that clarify the soul & heart and deepen the ability to love. I place myself there, with them, whoever they are, wherever they are, who seek to reach themselves and the other thru the poem by as many exits and entrances as are possible. (qtd. in Scobie, *bpNichol* 16-17)

Textual analysis and interpretation constitute an important aspect of that dialogue. But they are not the whole story.

NOTES

[1] A version of this introduction was published in a somewhat different form as "Preface to a Rhetoric of Reading Contemporary Canadian Literature." *Signature* 4 (Winter 1990): 13-28.

[2] In terms not specifically related to the study of postmodernism, Jonathan Culler's "Prolegomena to a Theory of Reading" offers a variation of Hutcheon's notion of poetics. After criticizing Northrop Frye's attempts to establish a poetics of criticism as methodologically inexplicit, Culler argues "that if the study of literature is a discipline, it must become a poetics: a study of the conditions of meaning and thus a study of reading" (49). Even here, however, the term "poetics" establishes a problematic frame of reference: reading, for Culler, becomes a matter of "literary competence"--a deep structure of linguistic and generic predispositions inferable from the analysis of reading performances. Such an approach, though true to the objectives of a "poetics," tends to leave out a great deal. The author, the psycholinguistic processes of reading--indeed, the whole notion of reading as an interactive *process*--become, for Culler, peripheral objects of attention. Despite the pleasant fiction suggested by the term "poetics," "conditions of meaning" are not stable entities to be taxonomized; the conditions of meaning are best treated as rhetorical situations, involving interaction among writers, readers, and texts. Until we define in rhetorical terms the process of reading, the notion of either a poetics of postmodernism or a poetics of literary competence remains premature.

[3] This "two-pronged" approach to literary theory, which William Ray describes as "[c]entral to Eco's work" (*Literary Meaning* 124), is often acknowledged but seldom followed.

[4] Robert Scholes also argues that rhetoric is crucial to our understanding of reading, and his argument also explores the implications of positing rhetoric against poetics (*Protocols of Reading* 105-08).

[5] Let me note here that I am not assuming that classical rhetoric and the New Rhetoric delimit the current field of rhetorical studies. When we talk about contemporary rhetoric, we are really talking about multiple rhetorics, of which the New Rhetoric is but one. The New Rhetoric has been referred to variously as "social-epistemic," "transactive," and (significantly) "postmodern rhetoric" (Brummett). For a comprehensive discussion of contemporary rhetorics, see James Berlin's *Rhetoric and Reality*; and, for a useful survey and assessment of the literature on epistemic rhetoric, see Jeffery L. Bineham's "The Cartesian Anxiety in Epistemic Rhetoric: An Assessment of the Literature."

[6] In his *Preface to Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, Josué V. Harari argues against finding in post-structuralist critics "a coherent critical unity" (12); instead, he says, we should recognize "a plurality of strategies at work" (12).

[7] Scobie is speaking here about both Nichol's "Two Words: a Wedding" and the 1966 "Statement," which, he says, balance and complement one another.

CHAPTER ONE

Of Rhetoric, Reading, and Radical Pedagogues: Metaphor and the Trope of Freedom

Canadian critics are fast recognizing that an understanding of the theoretical context that surrounds and interpenetrates texts such as *Burning Water* and *Caprice*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *What the Crow Said* may soon become regarded as a necessary focus of critical reading. Postmodernist authors characteristically conflate theory and literary practice. As Linda Hutcheon argues at the University of Ottawa Symposium, "Future Indicative: Literary Theory and Canadian Literature,"

> In their literary work they don't separate theory from practice, and that is why it's so attractive to many of us. When we teach their works we have to teach theory. *They* teach theory. (242)

I would emend Hutcheon's position slightly: "When we teach their works we have to teach how to read. They teach *reading*."

A concern with either learning or identifying new ways of reading is central to many of the presentations given during the 1986 symposium. "How do we read a novel which is self-consciously post-modern?" (229) asks Kenneth Hoeppner in his paper on *What the Crow Said*; Elizabeth Seddon notes that when she reads a novel by Timothy Findley she doesn't "feel like an audience"; she feels "like a reader, implicated, and it *is* personal" (213). And during the panel discussion which launched the symposium, one participant, taking issue with

Robert Kroetsch's remarks about the failure of the Canadian literary tradition, argues that "what has failed is not the text, which is simply 'there,' but the collective reading of the text" (Schellenberg, "Writer Writing" 23). A concern for reading provokes questions of process, personal response, and institutional responsibility. Such postmodernist criticism and commentary, fascinated with processes rather than products (change rather than stasis), constitutes a distinctive chorus and continually reminds us that it is real readers, not their encoded counterparts, who actually interpret texts. The dynamics of reading occurs interactively with the text, and despite the nagging authority of W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's "affective fallacy"--what Steven Mailloux now calls the "'affective fallacy' fallacy" ("Introduction" 9)--the reading process and the role of the reader increasingly command critical attention.

Like the postmodernist texts that typically blur distinctions between reality and fiction, the developing rhetoric of postmodernist reading theory in Canada (and in North America generally) seems intent upon embracing what would appear to be two irreconcilable concepts of the reader: (1) the reader as a hypothetical construct "encoded" in the text, and (2) the actual reader in the act of reading the text. Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman present the proposition in the form of a paradox: "If a reader may be 'in' a text as a character is in a novel, he or she is certainly also in it in a train of thought--both possessing it and possessed by it" (vii). However ambiguous, such propositions promise a mysterious mix of aesthetic detachment and pragmatic relevance once the process of reading and the status of readers become the primary subjects of scrutiny. The internal contradictions may appear even more pronounced, though, when we note that by partially grounding their model of reading in phenomenology, many postmodernist theorists and artists invoke notions of psychological realism while, at the same time, they call the conventions of realism (indeed, reality itself) into question.

The complexities of reading theory are daunting, and opinion is clearly divided over its ultimate significance: either the shift of emphasis from a mimetic to a pragmatic orientation offers a revolutionary change in the way narratives are written and read, or the new orientation provides simply a new repertoire of themes--a new angle on an old story. Linda Hutcheon calls for the act of reading metafictional discourse to be viewed as "a creative, interpretive one that partakes of the writing itself" (*Narcissistic* 144); and Jane Tompkins argues, "What began as a small shift of emphasis ends by becoming an exchange of world views" ("An Introduction" x). Yet others maintain, with Walter Ong, that "the writer's audience is always a fiction," a role cast by authors and divorced from "the rest of actual life" ("The Writer's" 12). Hutcheon and Tompkins seems to be describing the reading situation as pragmatic, a shared space for collaborative dialogue between writer and reader, while Ong, like Samuel Johnson taking one more kick at the stone, insists that "[r]eaders do not form a collectivity, acting here and now on one another and on the speaker as members of an audience do" (11). But, though the conventional distinctions between oral and written discourse allow Ong to dismiss the collaborative power of the reader, he is nonetheless careful to note that the "relationship of audience-fictionalizing to modern narrative prose is very mysterious, and I do not pretend to explain it all here" (17). My own purpose is not to "explain it all," but to offer an exploration of how the new focus on readers and the process of reading informs both the critical and creative work of three Canadian writers: George Bowering, Margaret Atwood, and Robert Kroetsch.

My main contention is that while the process of reading has not really changed, the rhetoric of reading *has* shifted dramatically from a focus on the text to a focus on the reader as the primary determiner of meaning. Writers such as Bowering and Kroetsch, and, in her recent prose fiction, Atwood, have adopted the enfranchisement of the audience as a central thematic and rhetorical concern, seeking to educate the reader *as reader* by establishing a rhetoric of collaboration and process, a rhetoric of reading that dramatizes the paradigm shift toward a postmodernist orientation.[1] The term "postmodernist" is, of course, as the wealth of critical debate attests, a problematic one, and I make no claim that the following discussion resolves the various attempts to theorize and define it. My concern here is not to explore the ways in which definitions of the *nouveau roman*, metafiction, surfiction, etc., differ and overlap, but rather to specify those places where postmodernist conceptions of the reader and reading align with the epistemological basis of New Rhetorical theory.

Avenues of Address: Bottom-up and Top-down Reading

The topic "A Rhetoric of reading" invokes three relevant and interrelated avenues of address: following the lead of Linda Flower, Christina Haas, and the Carnegie Mellon school of cognitive research and culture-centred criticism, we can explore and advocate rhetorical reading as an alternative to current pedagogical practice; next, we can adopt a metacritical stance and consider the tropological dimension of reading theory and the narratives it enables; and finally, as I stated in the Preface, we can use contemporary rhetorical theory as an "epistemic field" for understanding reading. The first and second of these approaches may be dealt with jointly, as an introduction to the terms of reference necessary for a rhetorical theory of reading the Canadian postmodern.

The recent scholarship of the New Rhetoric and the empirical research on composition and reading as cognitive activities both assume to varying degrees that writers and readers alike construct meaning through an interactive process: texts, readers, and writers are socially constructed by a continuous interaction of language, history, and culture. In the summary that follows I hope to show how the current postmodernist preoccupation with the process of reading literature shares a common ground with the discourse of educational psychology and psycholinguistics. A multidisciplinary interest in a social-cognitive model of reading and writing is in the air--and whatever its limitations, the current focus on the social and psycholinguistic dimensions of reading offers a general congruence of theoretical assumptions and language.

Conventionally, those investigating the cognitive processes of reading distinguish between two general ways a reader may interact with a text. The first kind of interaction, generally called "bottom-up" (or data-driven) processing, describes a process starting with basic input (letters) and passing through more and more sophisticated analysis until meaning is determined. The second kind of interaction describes a process starting with the reader's prior knowledge (knowledge of the world and knowledge of language conventions) and passing through a series of predictions to guide choices at focal levels of attention. This hypothesis-testing interaction is generally referred to as "top-down" (or conceptually-driven) processing.

Two models of note illustrate the bottom-up position: those proposed by Philip Gough and the joint work of David LaBerge and Jay Samuels. Gough's model articulates an information-processing theory of oral reading: visual information is registered and held in the visual memory while it is scanned for the purpose of identifying a pattern or sequence of letters. Letters are recognized through serial consultation of conventional patterns held in long-term memory. These letters then are "read" by a "Character Register" and subsequently translated into "systematic phonemes" by a "Decoder" mechanism. The reader transforms these phonemes into words, and, at the end of the transformational chain, understands the initial input as meaningful.

Without belabouring Gough's model by rehearsing it further, I simply wish to note the sequential rigidity with which this bottom-up process operates. The text establishes a stable reality, and reading becomes a matter of correct or incorrect deciphering. Questions about what is knowable and how the presence of the perceiver affects what may be perceived seem beside the point, for Gough sees the human "reader" implicitly in terms of a machine model, complete with functional parts such as "Character Registers" and "Decoders" that are labelled but left undefined. Note also that the kind of reading considered seldom involves more than a word or a short phrase; what is read requires a minimum of attention and interpretive skill. According to this early model, reading is strictly a one-way decoding process--but then prior knowledge and context are not attended to in Gough's suggestive but limited model.

Like the Gough model, the LaBerge-Samuels theory of reading describes a bottom-up process; unlike Gough, LaBerge and Samuels acknowledge some limited top-down capacity. Just the same, LaBerge and Samuels do not seriously challenge Gough's notion of the text as a stable and absolutely knowable reality. Reading here is a matter of activating internal codes corresponding to features, letters, spelling patterns, and ultimately visual representations of words that can be understood as meaningful. In addition, this second model provides for some top-down flexibility: fluent readers, through practice, can automatically process information without attention, and thus attention is available for getting meaning from printed words. Again, however, the focus remains upon discrete and relatively simple semantic units; LaBerge and Samuels have little to say about the way we comprehend (much less, interpret) complete texts. Still, the ability to recognize words automatically is, according to the LaBerge-Samuels model, a crucial constituent for an overall understanding of reading and, as such, deserves consideration. Samuels offers the following illustration:

> The beginning reader is putting a good deal of attention on the printed words, and in the process overlooking meaning. For the beginning reader, the route to meaning is indeed a tortuous one. On the other hand, the fluent reader pays very little attention to the printed words, and for the experienced reader the route to meaning is far more direct and easy. There are times, however, when the fluent reader encounters an unfamiliar word, which may require the laborious decoding characteristic of the beginning reader. ("Introduction" 15)

Kenneth Goodman's top-down model of reading echoes that suggested by LaBerge and Samuels. Although the two models are generally regarded as polar opposites, the process each describes is not so radically different. The important difference lies with the respective answers to the epistemological question of whether knowledge is actively created or merely discovered.

Goodman's model developed out of the author's experience with the oral reading of children: children's oral miscues (mismatches between oral responses and the text) led Goodman away from a word focus and toward a comprehension focus. Like the children "reading-in" meaning, the fluent reader engages in a predictive process, sampling from the visual information "just enough to confirm his guess of what's coming" (Goodman, "Reading" 127). As fellow "top-downer" Frank Smith explains, we predict on the basis of learned categories that allow us to organize objects and events in terms of their differences and similarities:

> No living organism could survive if it treated everything in its experience as the same; there would be no basis for differentiation and therefore no basis for learning . . . . But similarly, no living organism could survive if it treated everything in experience as different. If there is no basis for similarity there is still no basis for learning. . . . In other words, the basis for survival and of learning is the ability to ignore many potential differences so that certain objects will be

> treated as the same, yet as different from other objects. All objects that belong to one category are treated as the same, yet as different from objects belonging to other categories. (56-57)

These categories, though never static, are part of a psychological imperative that seeks coherence and consistency: "the system of knowledge in our heads is organized into an intricate and internally consistent working model of the world, built up through our interactions with the world and integrated into a coherent whole" (Smith 54). Thus Goodman insists that, in reading, "what the reader thinks he sees is partly what he sees, but largely what he expects to see" (*Miscue* 9). (Samuels, working within a "realist" episteme, would probably counter that reading is "largely what the reader sees, and partially what he expects to see.")

Even without detailed description and analysis, the form of the two processes is both clear and highly reminiscent of literary distinctions made between open and closed texts (or, for that matter, between the precepts of reader-response theory and New Criticism): the bottom-up view insists upon the primacy of the text; the top-down view puts the reader in charge of seeking after meaning and, in the process, throws realist notions of a stable, knowable text into question. Yet, despite their differences, the narrative descriptions of the models in action tend to blur the more subtle (more speculative) formal distinctions. Certainly the various proponents of reading models may argue over the unseen mechanism of the reading process; they may debate the direction and shape of the pathways to reading comprehension--whether the reader proceeds by applying prior knowledge and expectation to predict incoming information, or whether it is incoming information that triggers a sequence of pattern recognition and meaning-getting. But there seems no discernible disagreement regarding the notion that some form of top-down and bottom-up processing does occur, and that the top-down and bottom-up routes represent two identifiable ways of reading discrete units within a whole text.

As I mentioned, the narrative descriptions of the models makes one wonder just how different the two models really are. Compare Goodman's description of the reading process with Samuels' description of beginning and fluent readers (quoted above):

> Proficient readers are both efficient and effective. Such readers get to the meaning with minimal use of cues, minimal monitoring, confident prediction, minimal correction. Of course, proficient readers can shift to more cautious processing as their level of confidence drops. Proficient readers can also become non-proficient readers in coping with some texts. ("Know-More" 658)

Goodman's description mirrors that of Samuels; indeed, the processes would seem, if not identical, then at least complementary. It might well be argued that the difference between bottom-up and top-down reading lies not with the process but with the reading situation, the reader's use of context, and the reader's fluency. The mode of text apprehension will depend on the context and fluency of the reading act. The more familiar we are with the conventional approaches to texts, the more we will predict. Conversely, it is difficult to respond when we are unfamiliar with a text's rhetorical context: without contextual cues to aid prediction, a reader must rely on a "bottom-up" decoding strategy. Significantly, however, the bottom-up approach suggests a strategy that, while adequate for the recognition of words and phrases, lacks the requisite rhetorical sophistication necessary to contextualize and interpret whole texts.

From a rhetorical perspective, the concepts "bottom-up" and "top-down" suggest controlling metaphors--metaphors which represent very different notions of how we perceive and, in ethical terms, of how responsible we are for our perceptions. It may be true that, in some elementary ways, we do process information like computers; but the efficient processing of information has little to do with human creativity, emotion, and the rhetorical aspects of communication. Still, whatever their tendencies toward reductionism or overstatement, the controlling presence of such metaphors does foster debate, and it has provoked a search for a theory of reading that includes processes both "automatic" and human.[2]

More recent research on reading consistently returns to the importance of context, particularly to distinctions between the focal-level use of context for word recognition and the global-level use of context for the integration of new information into existing knowledge structures. Just such a distinction has prompted the formulation of "interactive" models of reading.

This research into the importance of context has produced some intriguing results--results not easily accommodated by traditional top-down and bottom-up models of reading. Specifically, since it is generally conceded that fluent readers demonstrate superior skill in using context to facilitate comprehension, it should follow that good readers would extend the hypothesis-testing process and make greater use of context for word recognition than unskilled readers. This is not the case, however. As David Rumelhart's "interactive" model implies, and as Keith Stanovich's "interactive-compensatory" model makes explicit, poor readers occasionally use context for word recognition more than good readers.[3] Stanovich offers the following explanation:

> Using hypotheses to facilitate word recognition may itself take cognitive capacity, thus leaving fewer resources for higher-level comprehension processes such as drawing implications or integrating new information with old. ("Interactive" 52)

The notion here is that readers possess limited reservoirs of cognitive capacity; when readers drain their resources by focusing on low-level activities, they have little capacity left for comprehension--they become preoccupied, and interpretation is impeded. Stanovich, building on Rumelhart's interactive model, suggests further that information may be drawn from any single processing level (top-down or bottom-up) to compensate for deficiencies at any other level: poor readers may use contextual information to compensate for deficient automatic word recognition skills.

Intriguingly, this whole discussion of "context" remains restricted to linguistic and cognitive concerns; the social, political, economic, historical--in short, the ideological conditions of knowledge--are all but ignored. Rumelhart, Stanovich, and the others are, of course, working within an academic discourse that seeks reliability and disciplinary rigor by establishing an experimental design to measure selected phenomena. Their objective is to capture some sense of how cognition operates by limiting their exploration to relatively simple aspects of the overall problem. As a result, the question of reading resolves itself into a study of "information processing" rather than of "interpretation." All this leaves the literary theorist with a methodological dilemma: a similar preoccupation with cognition will likely reduce our field of inquiry and thus runs the risk of robbing reading of its social significance; on the other hand, a failure to consider cognition can only result in an impoverished notion of reading *processes*. Linda Flower is clearly justified in noting that "English Studies are caught up in a debate over whether we should see individual cognition or social and cultural context as the motive force in literate acts" ("Cognition" 282). Flower herself argues against such dichotomies: she moves toward what she calls an "integrated theoretical vision which can explain how context cues cognition, which in turn mediates and interprets the particular world that context provides" (282). Such a model is hinted at perhaps in the interactive theories of Rumelhart and Stanovich, but the social dimension of reading certainly stays peripheral to their vision.

Nonetheless, even though the cognitive researcher's concept of "context" seems exclusively linguistic and unperturbed by questions of the reader's social or ideological environment, psycholinguistic research on reading can provide a valuable complement to the work of literary theorists. The kind of conclusions one may draw from top-down and interactive models of reading, for instance, lend empirical weight to the postmodernist claim that, since our perception of reality is filtered through a shifting process of possible responses, our knowledge of reality remains always conditional (subject to the interpretive strategies that habit and context allow). Literal-level understanding and interpretive response depend upon our working hypotheses about the way reading works: if we view reading as a bottom-up process of decoding distinctive features, we are likely to privilege a text's formal elements as the primary carriers of meaning; if we view reading as a top-down process whereby we bring meaning to text, we will be more aware of how contexts affect meaning. (Postmodernist writers and readers stress the latter view and tend to find the former view wanting.)

To say that reality and knowledge are conditional is simply to reiterate Smith's notion that we understand by testing "reality" against a pattern of learned categories, against "an internally consistent working model of the world." Or, as Robert Carey and Jerome Harste put it (in the language of educational psychologists), "one's conceptualization of reading in a given print setting acts as an anticipatory schema, which directs strategy utilization or perceptual exploration and, consequently, the process of sampling the available print" ("Comprehension" 190). Our beliefs, our gender, our race, our social position, our past experiences--all these factors influence the "anticipatory schema" that make some readings visible and keep other rival readings quite literally incomprehensible. The difficulty for those seeking quantifiable measures of context's influence on reading is that, as Carey and Harste note in an ironically gender-specific turn of phrase, "the entire notion of contextual importance retains . . . empirical virginity; it is as yet untainted by data" ("Comprehension" 193). As I shall argue later in some detail, the metaphors we use, though not "quantifiable" measures in the cognitive researcher's sense, provide a significant rhetorical indication of the both the author's and the reader's "anticipatory schemata." For now let me note that a rhetoric of reading may import concepts from other disciplines without giving assent to their methodology: from a rhetorical perspective, the way the story of reading is narrated is more important than the story's ultimate "truth." Linda Flower's work on cognition, culture, and reading engages some of these questions and offers a relevant illustration of just how difficult it is to balance the cognitive and social perspectives.

Linda Flower and Rhetorical Reading

As one might expect from her comments on theory building quoted above, Flower's approach to rhetorical reading seeks a more socially aware model of reading practices: in "Interpretive Acts: Cognition and the Construction of Discourse," she proposes a conceptual model "in which readers and writers build private mental representations of meaning in response to both external forces and internal, activated knowledge" (109). Elsewhere she argues that we need a theoretical framework "that acknowledges the pressure and the potential the social context can provide . . ." ("Cognitive" 284). I should note here that, in terms of the discourse community of rhetoric and composition scholars within which Flower works and writes, any attempt to bring together the cognitive and social constructivist positions marks an extraordinary move. Kenneth Bruffee, for example, argues that the two modes of inquiry are incompatible: cognitive theorists construct models that they test against experimental data--the assumption being that observable behaviour can give us insights into the unobservable, our thought processes; the social constructivist "alternative to this foundational cognitive assumption is nonfoundational. . . . There is only agreement, a consensus arrived at for the time being by communities of knowledgeable peers" (Bruffee, "Social Construction" 776-77). The social constructivist is one who adopts a pragmatic postmodernist stance regarding the social and intersubjective construction of knowledge: for the social constructivist and postmodernist alike, reality, theories, facts, texts, selves, etc., are regarded as "language constructs" generated by communities to maintain provisional coherence and to facilitate further knowledge-making. Flower's proposed synthesis (signalled by the juxtaposition of "cognition" and "construction" in her essay's title) does seem an unlikely union, especially since Flower gives no evidence of epistemological doubt regarding the validity of her own observations. What draws the two ostensibly divergent positions together, however--and this, I suspect, lies behind Flower's decision to try and unify them into a single model--is that the cognitive schemata and reading models recently proposed by educational psychologists and cognitive researchers bear a striking resemblance to the social process described by Bruffee, Thomas Kuhn, Richard Rorty, Clifford Geertz, Erving Goffman, and others.[4] The presuppositions of postmodernism are already affecting (and affected by) scholarly discourse.

When an individual hypothesis achieves general assent, says the social constructivist, it assumes paradigmatic status. As long as the paradigm holds, it governs the view of reality accepted by an intellectual community. The paradigm, then, is an epistemological accord that delimits perception and inquiry. Any new insight that challenges the prevailing paradigm challenges the fundamental assumptions of the community; and if the challenge is strong enough, it initiates a paradigm shift and provokes a period of indeterminacy and confusion. Cognitive theories of reading describe a very similar, if localized, model of the reader actively constructing meaning. The top-down theory of reading, remember, argues that it is the reader who brings meaning to the text. David Rumelhart offers a typical top-down description of the process in action, a description that echoes the Kuhnian notion of paradigm shifting and reformulation:

> a reader of a text is presumably constantly evaluating hypotheses about the most plausible interpretation of a text.

> Readers are said to have understood the text when they are able to find a configuration of hypotheses (schemata) that offers a coherent account for the various aspects of the text. To the degree to which a particular reader fails to find such a configuration, the text will appear disjointed and incomprehensible. ("Schemata" 38)

The reader brings meaning to the text by way of hypotheses to be tested against the text; when new information contradicts the governing set of hypotheses, the reader's expectations (her frame of reference) is temporarily dislocated. At this point, the reader assimilates the new information and accordingly establishes a new set of expectations. Thus reading literature involves what Kenneth Goodman has called "a psycholinguistic guessing-game"--a continuous process of hypothesis testing and reformulation. The "textual cues" (our perception of the author's intention, the generic presuppositions we bring to the text, etc.) all jockey for position until an appropriate frame is established, a pattern is recognized, and prediction is facilitated.

Lev Vygotsky says in *Thought and Language* that a "word is a microcosm of human consciousness" (153). Similarly, reading, when viewed as a top-down process, presents a microcosm of the social constructivist episteme. Top-down reading may be taken as merely analogous to social constructivist notions of how we know; or, if looked at metacritically, it may be seen as part of a growing, social consensus about the way we construct knowledge and interpret discourse. But while there is much to unite the cognitive and constructivist positions, they still represent two very different ways of looking at the world. The social-constructivist school posits metacritical awareness as central to its social purposes, while cognitive psychology never seriously questions its own ideological purposes and the ways in which those purposes might shape its epistemological orientation. Flower does not seem to take this into account: she never reflects upon the realist presuppositions of the discourse community to which she belongs; and she never seriously questions whether a social constructivist perspective on reading *can* be adopted by a cognitive perspective concerned with the "reality" of empirical evidence. In short, she does not reflect upon the possibility that the social constructivist thesis' adherence to a nonfoundational epistemology conflicts with the realist bias of cognitive psychology. Flower's desire to write "the" story of reading conflicts with a social-constructivist (and New Rhetorical) motive: to write "a" story of reading that is inevitably an extrapolation of, and thus essentially about, epistemology.

Not surprisingly, though she notes that reading should be treated as a cognitive act influenced by cultural forces, Flower nonetheless privileges cognitive processes, claiming indeed that in her model "the constructive processes of reader and writer are at the center of the stage" ("Interpretive Acts" 110)--social context, discourse conventions, language, etc., are described in terms of "an outer circle of external forces" (110) impinging upon cognition. Unlike the cultural historian tracing the ways in which these forces "shine through" our interpretations of texts, Flower argues that her goal "is not to explicate these 'forces' . . . but to account for the *process by which they are mediated in the act of interpretation and response*" (118). This separation of "forces" from "process" is revealing, for to the social constructivist, reading's dialogic nature precludes ready access to an identifiable mediating process. As Mikhail Bakhtin says,

> When a member of a speaking collective comes upon a word, it is not as a neutral word of language, not as a word free from the aspirations and evaluations of others, uninhabited by others' voices. No, he receives the word from another's voice and filled with that other voice. The word enters his context from another context, permeated with the interpretations of others. His own thought finds the word already inhabited. (*Problems* 202)

We should add that not only is the word inhabited, but the reader's thought too is inhabited--and thus ultimately inseparable from the social forces that construct it. Without an "explication" of these forces, Flower cannot really say to what extent the process of mediation (or, rather, her conception of the process of mediation) is itself written by cultural and epistemological imperatives. We are presented instead with a pedagogical strategy that elides the theoretical problem of interpretive freedom and proceeds as if the reader *is* (or, with practice, *can be*) in control of the process.

Her cognitive model focuses on how writers and readers develop "*a mental representation of meaning* as they work" ("Interpretive Acts" 111). This mental representation, constructed and reconstructed throughout the process of writing and reading, "is not the same as the text. . . . The *text* is simply one instantiation of that mental network of meaning. That is, it is a concrete instance *in prose* of a more complex or general mental representation" (111). Flower's reader thus becomes an "arch-negotiator," free to negotiate meaning within a field of often contradictory social forces, discourse conventions, and mental representations of texts; and the "top-down" model becomes a ground for building goal-oriented but culturally aware readings. My only complaint with Flower's account is that she fails to demonstrate the kind of critical self-consciousness she recommends to others: rhetorically sophisticated readings, she indicates, hinge on readers' abilities to focus attention on how representations of texts are built--on their abilities "to [monitor] the process of their representation[s], and to [deal] with incongruities" (128). But, as I suggested above, Flower's faith in the social-cognitive model's power to liberate readers from social and pedagogical oppression does not allow her to deal with the incongruities of her own position. Instead of questioning the readers' freedom to negotiate meaning, instead of asking, indeed, how selves and knowledge are socially constructed, she treats readers as apprentice scientists able (once they have mastered certain strategies) to assert control over the "experimental process" of reading. In other words, though she assumes that meaning is constructed, she does not allow that the reader may be socially constructed as well. If this seems a small lapse in an otherwise consistent view of reading as a social act, it still underscores the difficulty (the impossibility) of articulating an epistemologically "pure" theory. Ironically enough, the presence of social constructivism opens up gaps in Flower's "empirical" study of reading.

Despite her adherence to the epistemology of cognitive psychology, Flower does make a strong case for regarding rhetorical reading as that which involves interpreting both "the text" and the rhetorical context that makes interpretation possible. Recognition of this interactive process--what some term "metacognitive awareness"[5]--yields a self-conscious appreciation of texts "as purposeful actions, arising from contexts, and with intended effects" (Haas and Flower, "Rhetorical" 170). "Knowing about" is cast as a crucial aspect of "knowing." The level of such awareness varies among readers; as Flower suggests, a reader may be

> aware of some of this process, able to monitor or modify it, or he may carry it out in blissful ignorance. Blissful ignorance can describe the philosophical stance of readers who assume that they are reading the text objectively, perceiving an unmediated version of the 'author's' meaning. ("Interpretive Acts" 111-112)

Flower's pedagogical objective is to move the reader from a position of ignorance to a position of heightened rhetorical awareness.

Implicitly, however, Flower challenges both the conventional assumptions of realism and, indeed, the whole realist episteme of which the cognitive position is but a part. The postmodernist premises and tropes of social constructivism which Flower imports provoke a radical critique of reading theories that privilege notions of objectivity and transcendental truth. Old reading habits are invoked as blissfully ignorant and stifling; the new reading strategies are described by metaphors of power and resistance--these are strategies that produce "strong readers" (McCormick and Waller) and "resisting readers" (Fetterley), who read "against the grain." The problem, once again, lies with the notion of just how free the reader can be.

I am aware that the social constructivist (and postmodernist) problematizing of freedom may be read as an unnecessary distraction from Flower's pragmatic concern to develop pedagogically useful strategies for critical reading. Teachers perhaps feel that they cannot afford to be too "theoretical" on this issue: after all, they must "do" something in the classroom, and most teachers like to think that what they do has positive social and intellectual consequences. To look within one's metaphors and question one's epistemological base may be to run the risk of tearing the seams between implicit theory and classroom practice. But that is just the danger we need to risk if we are going to take rhetorical "awareness" seriously and challenge realist thought. James Berlin has argued that, in terms of pedagogy, Flower's cognitive focus can be seen "as compatible with the ideology of the meritocratic university described in Bowles and Gintis' *Schooling in Capitalist America*" ("Rhetoric and Ideology" 483). According to Berlin, Flower's focus on improving cognitive skills deflects attention from the possibility that notions of what constitutes an "improved" skill are themselves ideological constructs serving the interests of a ruling corporate elite. Power resides in the discourse conventions and presuppositions of a community of experts who train the uninitiated in culturally-sanctioned, "rational," and goal-directed activities:

> Certain structures of the material world, the mind, and language, and their correspondence with certain goals, problem-solving heuristics, and solutions in the economic, social, and political are regarded as inherent features of the universe, existing apart from human social intervention. The existent, the good, and the possible are inscribed in the very nature of things as indisputable scientific facts, rather than being seen as humanly devised social constructions always remaining open to discussion. (Berlin, "Rhetoric and Ideology 484)

A more ideologically-aware rhetoric of reading would not take the issue of interpretive freedom for granted, seeking instead to keep the discussion open.

Bilingual Reading

Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey offer some salutary reminders about the liberal humanist ideal of individual freedom and consciousness--reminders that speak to the issues Flower's work raises. Balibar and Macherey define the status of the text in terms of its social reception, arguing that we consider "all the historic dissimilar modes of reading texts":

> the 'free' reading, reading for the pure 'pleasure' of letters, the critical reading giving a more or less theorised, more or less 'scientific' commentary on form and content, meaning, 'style', 'textuality' (revealing neologism!)--and behind all readings, the explication of texts by academics which conditions all the rest. (11)

The important contribution to reading theory made by critics such as Balibar and Macherey (and Althusser before them) centres on the insight that any reading--what they term a "literary effect"--"is not produced by a [single] determinate process, but actively inserts itself within the reproduction of other ideological effects" (11). As the limited applicability of early (bottom-up) pedagogical models to literary interpretation suggests, however impressive an empirical account of the reading process may be, by neglecting the larger social process ("the rituals of literary consumption and 'cultural' practice" (11)) its relevance may be justifiably viewed as of only marginal interest to literary scholars. For, again as Balibar and Macherey point out, there is a significant difference between "the discourse of those who 'write' (books) and 'read' them, and the discourse of those who do not know how to do it although quite simply they 'know how to read and write'" (12). The author too must work within the dominant discourse, for, as Bowering attests, one "does not want to create and write a new language; rather one wants to work out a new relationship with language. One wants to speak inside the dominant discourse, but if one is thinking at all, one is perforce bilingual" (*Errata* 96). Similarly, then, the distinction between reading so-called "non-literary" texts and "literary" texts lies not with the reader's mastery of some ideologically neutral psycholinguist process, but, at least in part, with the reader's access to the dominant interpretive discourse.

Paradigms, schemata, interpretive communities[6]--each is a metaphor describing a socially constructed constraint upon subjective response that, in effect, renders the notions of unified subjectivity and totally free interpretation as little more than the pleasant fictions of a rival epistemology. There are, presumably, two alternatives according to the constructivist story of reading: one can submit to the ruling discourse (let the discourse write one's own reading), or one can resist by reading the text and one's initial response as products of their social context. Ironically, by questioning all universal foundations and asserting that the structure of knowledge rests upon the temporary consensus reached by knowledge communities, the constructivist theory seems to leave the reader no firm place to stand and resist. Instead, the reader is obliged to acknowledge that reading is situational and dependent upon the kind of rhetorical interaction we have been examining; and meaning, so viewed, does not exist apart from the dialectical process of sorting out alternative interpretations. It is just this sort of ironic relationship between interpretation and the dominant discourse that describes Offred's discomfort in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: the "truth" lies with those who have the power to tell the story; and finding herself without access to such power, Offred interprets her situation by relying as much upon belief as she does upon critical acumen. Belief, though, is never ideologically neutral: to assert belief in a world without absolute truth becomes, "if one is thinking at all," a problem of ethics. Reading too is a matter of belief and ethics, for we can no longer innocently test our readings against an objective text. The text's meaning is always already "inhabited" by our presuppositions. We become more responsible--not less responsible--for both what we believe and how we persuade others of our beliefs. Thus, as Richard Rorty says of critical theorizing in general, reading in the postmodern condition becomes a matter of "playing off alternatives against one another, rather than playing them off against criteria of rationality, much less against eternal verities" ("Hermeneutics" 11). The focus shifts from "knowledge" (as a matter of justified true belief) to the process of "knowing" (as a matter of probability and the rhetorical shaping of beliefs).

Playfulness, as I have implied, and as Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* dramatizes, is not without its own contradictions, for, if we extend the logic of the constructivist position, reading such as Rorty describes can never exhibit free play; its freedom is always socially conditioned and thus suspect--a matter of "being played" rather than "playing." The best we can do is to open a window of cognitive awareness--to become, in Bowering's terms, "bilingual"--by treating the text as a site of struggle between dominant and dominated readings, as the locus of rhetorical exchange.

As I have already indicated in passing, psycholinguistic models, whether they be models of acquisition or of competence, tend to ignore questions of context. (After all, it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate out ideology as a categorical variable.) Instead they focus on a hypothetical ideal: the individual reading experience. The notion of the reader emancipated from social influences is today a commonplace of pedagogical practice that, while seeming to acknowledge an ideological dimension to reading, effectively domesticates the work of thinkers such as Balibar and Macherey by treating "prior knowledge" as a purely subjective constituent. "Each reader," says the author of a representative article in the *Canadian Journal of English Language Arts*,

> brings to a literary selection his/her own prior knowledge, present interests, expectations and past experiences with literature that influence the way he/she will read and interpret the text. Consequently there is no universal interpretation of text. (Wason-Ellam 54)

The practical implications of such a view are acted out within the classroom setting (treated here by the author as a neutral space). Students are encouraged to exchange personal reactions to the text and thus "learn to actively search for their own meaning" (54). The goal of this personal activity, however, does not end with a celebration of individual aesthetic response; the "emphasis," says the author, "should be on developing a richer understanding of literature while establishing a lifetime pattern for reading quality literary selections" (54). These last three words, of course, betray an ideological stance, one with the presumed authority to define "quality," "literariness," and to approve what is and is not "selected." What at first glance appears a radical pedagogical alternative becomes little more than an up-dated version of liberal humanism.

Despite the rhetorical privileging of individual response, the author of the *Canadian Journal* article, like most English teachers, sees her role as one of providing "planned instructional activities that foster reading both critically and appreciatively" (54). The planning of curricula and the evaluation of students' performances constitute unavoidable institutional constraints on reading; yet, as long as reading remains defined as a purely personal process abstractable from ideological forces, well-intentioned teachers (and literary theorists) seem likely to underestimate the extent to which readings and readers are socially constructed. We need a way to read the context as well as the text. That way, I shall argue, requires a new focus on, and redefinition of, the relationship between reading and epistemology.

Process, Metaphor, and Pedagogy

By shifting to a consideration of what I've been describing as reading's "rhetorical" aspect, we can begin to broaden Flower's cognitive focus and explore more fully the metaphorical and epistemological underpinnings that inform postmodernist stories of reading.

Whether these stories manifest themselves in theoretical or narrative discourse, their purpose (as Hutcheon has noted of postmodernist writing generally) seems "self-consciously didactic" and thus rhetorical. Beyond their suasory aspects, they offer discussion on reading's bifocal ("bilingual") process, its ethical dimension, and its intersubjective nature. Barry Brummett, in "Some Implications of 'Process' or 'Intersubjectivity': Postmodern Rhetoric," has worked out a comprehensive narrative of postmodernism's rhetorical character. Brummett's approach serves as a congenial model for defining the crucial elements of a "postmodern rhetoric" of reading.

He argues that a thorough treatment of "process" and "intersubjectivity"--two notions central to both social constructivism and postmodernism--needs a rhetorical perspective: "process is the most valuable philosophy for the study of rhetoric, and rhetoric is the most valuable study for the intersubjective philosophy" (21). He develops his argument in four stages: first he reviews the kind of empiricist philosophy (specifically Newtonian mechanics) that confounds Flower's research; next, he posits in opposition to empirical "reality" a postmodern reality, one that denies the dichotomy between "what humanity knows and what there is to know" (28); third, he argues that in a postmodern world where metaphysics and epistemology collapse into a single mode of inquiry, and where "truth" is founded upon agreement shared by an individual and significant others, "the most ethical world view [becomes] one with rhetoric at its center" (32); and, finally, he offers a tentative methodology in which focal-level attention to a particular problem is guided by a holistic perspective, a "subsidiary awareness" (47) that illuminates what Brummett terms "the whole system" (46). We have already begun a review and critique of the realist world view, and Brummett's final point we have addressed in terms of metacognitive awareness--a critical feature of any rhetoric of reading, and one that I shall return to in my discussion of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Now we need to come to terms with the implications of a process-oriented (or intersubjective) world view and explore what rhetoric can contribute toward our understanding of a process-oriented theory of reading.

As indicated, the contemporary critical and creative narrative both interrogates and opposes the artistic conventions, epistemology, and ideology of realism, and posits as an alternative a radical pedagogy implicit in its developing postmodernist conception of reading. Alison Lee notes in *Realism and Power* that "[r]ealism has not disappeared, but it is being challenged--and *that* is the function of postmodern fiction [and theory] today" (141)--and she is correct, as far as she goes. But, in terms of a rhetoric of reading the postmodern, the interesting feature of the discourse is not simply its explicit challenge but its inability to cast off the tropes and implicit assumptions associated with the realist episteme it wishes to overthrow. That is, we need rhetoric to construct a metacognitively aware narrative: if postmodernist authors and texts teach new ways of reading and, by definition, new ways of knowing, then a rhetoric of reading the postmodern must explain how the new reading process differs (or fails to differ) from earlier theory and practice.

One place to begin is by acknowledging that postmodernist epistemologies and theories of reading are not created in a vacuum: any epistemological position, or anticipatory schema, is already an ideological construction. That is, epistemology is situated in ideology. Any discourse, for example, intent upon challenging existing (pedagogically entrenched) reading practices shares common ground with others wishing to effect social and political change. As Linda Flower's discussion of rhetorical reading illustrates, emancipatory arguments characteristically invoke images of freedom, of liberation from oppressive practice or theory. Realist reading practices are described as "a tool of ideological control"; and post-structuralist reading is said to "radically [undermine] a whole system of social and pedagogical control which depends for its power on there being a 'good' or a 'truth' which is transcendental" (Lee 27). The problem for a rhetoric of reading is that, like the text, neither epistemology nor ideology is objectively available for contemplation. We can, however, treat both as vital interpretive concerns by keeping the question of how we know at the centre of our inquiry.

The kind of interdisciplinary exploration necessitated by a joint focus on reading and rhetoric repeatedly returns to questions of process and power (especially pedagogical power and interpretive freedom), to tropological aspects of language, and to epistemology. We can hardly ignore the fact that the creation of a new discourse--one that treats reading as a rhetorical practice--establishes its own way of "seeing" the subject, establishes (or valorizes) particular metaphors that enable new ways of thinking and talking about reading; thus it seems fair to speak about "the rhetoric of reading theory" and how that rhetoric influences (or has the potential to influence) the problems we see, the questions we ask, and the language we use.[7] Such a line of inquiry has already been initiated by researchers such as Michael Reddy, in his exploration of "The Conduit Metaphor," and Douglas Vipond and Russell Hunt in their discussion of "linear vs. transactional metaphors" as ways of conceptualizing aesthetic reading. Their shared premise holds that the kinds of stories people tell about reading--the situations they describe, the problems they narrate--are both enabled and constrained by the metaphors they employ. Failure to consider and periodically to question the epistemological assumptions that influence our choice of metaphors can only lead to a reification of traditional realist practice (and pedagogy) and an inability to respond to the exigencies of artistic and social change.

In particular we need to explore how a celebration of the reader's "freedom to interpret" has generally complemented and certainly complicated this shift from linear to transactional (or collaborative) metaphors. The question of interpretive freedom has become something of a problematic argument and trope, especially in contemporary literary theory, where the ideological commitment to the emancipatory power of reading conflicts with the half-dead metaphors of a lingering product-oriented, realist epistemology.

The present moment seems an opportune time to begin an interdisciplinary focus on the rhetoric of reading theory, for, not only has rhetoric boasted a resurgence among twentieth-century literary critics and theorists but, as Stanley Fish notes in his recent contribution to *Critical Terms For Literary Study*, it has become a rallying point for "innumerable theorists of composition who, under the slogan 'process, not product,' insist on the rhetorical nature of communication and argue for far-reaching changes in the way writing [and reading are] taught" ("Rhetoric" 220). The topic of "process" has been, in Louise Wetherbee Phelps words, the "generative theme" in composition for nearly two decades; further, it has rehabilitated a rhetorical perspective on language production and reception: "By keying composition studies to writers' thought processes and the relations between cognition and language, this theme has restored to the field what was lost with the decline of rhetoric: a genuinely rich, humanly significant, and inexhaustible object of inquiry" (12). Similarly, any focus on the cognitive *process* of literary reading seems bound to involve rhetorical principles and conceptual metaphors that challenge conventional beliefs and values. Indeed, as George Lakoff explains in a recent interview, a process-oriented view of metaphor has revolutionized many linguists' notions of how tropes should be defined. In response to a question about the "psychologization" of the classical trope, Lakoff says,

> The first thing I should do is give an account of what was discovered about metaphor, partly by me, Michael Reddy and others. The traditional view holds that metaphor is verbal and grounded in language, rather than in thought. It also holds that metaphor occurs in poetic rather than ordinary language. Secondly, metaphor was traditionally viewed as based on similarity. A third traditional position holds that metaphor is a way of ornamenting a straightforward literal language. What

> we've found is that all of these traditional views are false, and in addition found that all traditional theories of meaning are false. (McCaffery 13-14)

What Lakoff and others have "discovered" is the basic rhetorical premise that the world of objects, properties, relationships and categories are not "out there in the world independent of any perceiving or experiential subjects . . ." (McCaffery 18). The realist's belief in absolute truth and independent form "doesn't work for humanly constructed institutions or any abstract concepts . . . ontology depends very much upon epistemology and is not independent of it" (18).

Given the explanatory power of this dialogue between rhetoric and cognitive theory, and given the variety of similar conversations being held among those interested in issues of process and epistemology, we should not be surprised that, for some, old notions of meaning as embedded in the well-wrought New Critical text seem in the process of shifting toward a postmodern view of reading as a crucial interactive (and collaborative) element of the enunciation. And, as Reddy argues at great length, the characteristic conduit metaphors of the old episteme will not do: they valorize notions of "transmitting," "conveying," and "receiving" language, while they prohibit the power of the reader to "read things into the text." Typically we speak of "putting ideas *into* words," "getting ideas *across*," and "*extracting* meaning *from* texts"; Reddy's response, what he calls "the toolmakers paradigm," is offered as an "alternative way of conceiving of human communication" (292). Like the making of tools, "[h]uman communication will almost always go astray unless real energy is expended" (295). The meaning of instructions, whether they be a diagram for fashioning a rake or a set of cues to prompt reader response, depends upon the circumstances of their reception; and "[p]artial miscommunication, or divergence of readings from a single text, are not aberrations. They are tendencies inherent in the system, which can only be counteracted by continuous effort and by large amounts of verbal interaction" (295). Reddy therefore asks that we stop regarding meaning as a property of texts and recognize that the readers and writers who construct meaning "themselves *are* the repositories, the only real repositories of ideas" (310). We might note in passing that the language here not only endorses the process argument but it invokes those images of liberation from self-imposed linguistic constraints that I suggested are characteristic of the discourse: it is a celebration of the role of human agency and a rejection of theories that treat communication in terms of "shunting information" (Vipond and Hunt 178).

That the work of Reddy, Vipond, and Hunt is better known among composition specialists than it is among literary theorists should not surprise us. Composition researchers have shown themselves to be the most enthusiastic advocates of a postmodern concern for process and human interaction. As early as 1976, Barry Brummett was busy working out the features and implications of a "postmodern rhetoric." And thirteen years later, Andrea Lunsford in her Chair's Address to the 1989 Conference on College Composition and Communication declared the field of composition studies "a postmodern discipline"--that is, one that self-consciously blurs disciplinary boundaries, stresses collaboration, seeks to foster dialogue, to "democratize reading and writing for ourselves and our students," and to maintain a commitment to both *praxis* and *theoria*, keeping inquiry "firmly situated in the experience of the classroom community, no matter how far into the thickets of theory we may explore" ("Composing Ourselves" 76). Once again we hear the voice of a liberationist ideology: social hierarchies and disciplinary boundaries fall before the collaborative, democratic impulses that are said to inform reading, writing, and classroom practice. Carl Freedman, in "Marxist Theory, Radical Pedagogy, and the Reification of Thought," describes teachers such as Lunsford as "radical pedagogues" who are "likely to be occupied with attempting to restructure the classroom situation in non-authoritarian ways, or encouraging students to produce collectively written projects . . ." (78). Like Henry Giroux (in his *Theory and Resistance in Education: A Pedagogy for the Opposition*) or Paulo Friere (in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*), the radical pedagogue begins with the proposition that

> students bring different histories to schools; these histories are embedded in class, gender, and race interests that shape their needs and behavior, often in ways they don't understand or that work against their own interests. (Giroux 149)

For such teachers (and indeed for all those who view the reading and writing of literature from a postmodernist rhetorical stance) the old metaphors depicting reading as a decoding activity run contrary to their sense that class, gender, race, and individual motivations influence the composition of meaning. The focus thus shifts from the text (as a repository of meaning) to readers, whose responses when shared help construct a "collective reading" that is both multiple and culturally situated.

The Process Model and Literary Theory

The sentiments expressed so far, of course, are not exclusive to radical pedagogues: one can hardly read a current article on critical theory without being reminded about the role of ideology, politics, gender, history, etc. What is interesting, therefore, is the relative lack of attention literary theorists have paid to actual readers and reading practices. As Robert Carey notes, one "of the interesting ironies . . . is the fact that there has been so little cross-over between . . . reading and literary theories . . ." (18). In a similar vein Ross Winterowd argues that while a theory of literature is necessarily a theory of reading,

> This theory, however, has nothing to do--will apparently, have nothing to do--with the long history of psychological and linguistic work, stretching back at least to 1908 when Edmund Burke Huey published his remarkable *The Psychology and*

> *Pedagogy of Reading* (reissued by MIT in 1968, with a foreword by George Miller) and running through to the present, for . . . humanists tend to outlaw certain methods and points of view, regardless of the questions they might be asking. ("The Purification" 261)

Winterowd depicts this breakdown in communication as a matter of institutional politics; he wants reading theorists, composition specialists, rhetoricians, and literary theorists to start talking to one another and thus to redefine the discourse of textual studies. But, in a sense, especially with reference to postmodernism, the conversation has already begun; the difficulty, it seems, is that at crucial points in the conversation the parties involved speak different languages. The translation of reading theory and pedagogical rhetoric (stressing social context, individual interpretive freedom, and cognitive processes) into the discourse of literary theory often provokes linguistic inconsistencies and conceptual ambiguity. It is all very well to accept in principle that the reader brings meaning to the text; it is much more difficult to reconcile such emancipatory pragmaticism with the legacy of text-based assumptions that still influence the way we think and write about (and teach) literary reading. As Bakhtin says of discourse generally, "[w]ithin the arena of almost every utterance an intense interaction is being waged, a process by which they oppose and interanimate each other" (*Dialogic* 354).[8] The topic of reading provokes a revealing case study of how this dialogic opposition and interanimation of process and product orientations influences what we can and cannot say.

In literary studies, the rejection of a product orientation has been tentative and, ironically as seems appropriate, tied to the exploration of a particular discourse: postmodernist writing. Postmodernist writers and critics repeatedly focus attention on reading, seeking to answer the question, "How do we read a novel which is self-consciously postmodern?" Philippe Sollers, in the published version of his 1965 *Tel Quel* lecture, helps establish the contemporary terms of reference for literary theorists when he argues that "[t]he essential question today is no longer the *writer* and the *work* (still less 'the work of art') but instead *writing* and *reading*" (68). More recently, in an essay on "Psychologies of Reading," Temma Berg reaffirms Sollers' line of inquiry, noting that

> Postmodern literary theory has become, almost more than anything else, the problematics of reading, for to examine the process of reading is to raise a host of difficult, though fascinating, questions. Above all, we want to know How *do* we read? (248)

The assumption here, that changing literary forms affect the process of reading, echoes the Romantic quest to define discourse as an affective phenomenon--from De Quincey's condemnation of "loose habits of reading," to Coleridge's recommendation that his readers "retire into themselves and make their own minds the objects of their stedfast attention," to Wordsworth's theorizing, where he exhorts his readers to practice an "exertion of a co-operating *power*" in concert with the poet's own creative energy (qtd. in Nabholtz 4). As in all "revolutions," aesthetic or otherwise, the implicit promise is one of liberation: where Wordsworth offers "co-operating *power*," postmodernists such as Raymond Federman promise that by reading postmodernist literature, "the reader will discover his freedom in relation to the process of reading a book, in relation to language and fiction" (10). Or, as Linda Hutcheon puts it, the "reader has always been a collaborator, an accomplice. Metafiction explicitly adds the dimension of reading as a process parallel to writing as an imaginative creative act" (*Narcissistic* 151).

Yet, despite the crucial significance of reading to an understanding of Canadian postmodernist texts, this added dimension of "reading as a process parallel to writing" lacks critical definition. Often as not, the reading process is invoked only to be grossly oversimplified, or summarily assimilated as a property of the text--and thus treated not as a "process" at all. Kenneth Hoeppner's answer to the question of how we should read

Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said*--Hoeppner argues that "Kroetsch tempts us as readers to try to make meaning out of fiction" (229)--does not take us very far. What is reading (any reading) if not an attempt to "make meaning"? Similarly, Hutcheon's treatment of the reader as "a function implicit in the text, an element of the narrative situation" (*Narcissistic* 139), contradicts her own description of the reader as "*always* an actively mediating presence" (141). We can, of course, speak profitably about empirical readers, implied readers, and the relations between them; but a theory of reading limited to the implicit function of a "diegetic identity" (139) seems bound to make the reader little more than an appositive to those formal characteristics present (or at least regarded as present) in the text.

Russell Hunt notes in his suggestive review of *Narcissistic Narrative* that Hutcheon's "model of what readers do and have done is not detailed or subtle enough for her purposes" (242). What Hunt wants, of course, is greater consistency and coherence: his assumption, based on his own work with empirical readers, is that reading theories should have something in common with what we know about actual reading practices. While Hutcheon seems sympathetic to a discussion of these practices, her adherence to the language of a product-centred discipline proves problematic. To support her notions of reader "collaboration" and "creativity" Hutcheon cannot avoid talking about reading processes; but, since her primary subject involves the taxonomy of "new literary phenomena" (39), she finds it necessary to describe the object of reader response as a self-sufficient structure. The central image of her first book gives the game away: she retells the Narcissus myth, laying emphasis not upon perception (the narcissistic gaze), but upon the pool's reflective qualities. By analogy, the "thin paper is the reflecting pool; the text is its own mirror" (14). Metafiction becomes, for Hutcheon, a category of "[s]elf-interpreting texts" (152); the role of the empirical reader diminishes; and her frequent references to the reader's freedom to produce meaning becomes a recurrent, irreconciled contradiction.

Hutcheon's contradictory stance presents a typical example of what Donald Schön and Michael Reddy have termed "frame conflict": a contrary mixing of presuppositions drawn from conflicting (and often competing) paradigms. This conflict reveals itself in terms of the "stories that people tell about troublesome situations"(Reddy 284)--especially stories about acts of communication and interpretation.[9] In Hutcheon's case, her commitment to postmodernist theory conflicts with a presumably unconscious adherence to the language of a realist episteme. For in Canada, the conventions of reading practiced and promoted by the critical establishment tend to be those first developed to interpret and teach works of realism--to teach them *as* works of realism. While there seems to be a rising feeling among some authors and critics that we need to develop new ways of reading, the new stories about how we read are invariably structured in opposition to (and sometimes subtly by) preceding theories. Contemporary writers such as Bowering, Kroetsch, bpNichol, and others, self-consciously equate realism with an antiquated, product-centred view of the world, and then they juxtapose postmodernism (or, as Bowering terms it, "post-realism") as a therapeutic alternative. When Bowering notes approvingly that the "laws of realism are under attack . . . from a critical irony which engages their logic in the process of making fiction" ("Painted Window" 120), he does so to explain and promote a new set of reading conventions. "The post-modernist novelist," he says in "The Painted Window," "admits the power of the reader" (120); earlier in the same article he explains,

> one used to be a reader looking to see what an author is looking to see what a narrator is looking to see what a character is looking at. The usual Joseph Conrad concentricity. Now they may all be joined, not by a shared 'true to lifeness,' but in self-admitted fictionality (117).

Similarly, in *Narcissistic Narrative*, Hutcheon's story of the novel's development from realist to postmodernist forms puts heavy emphasis upon the changing role of the reader: "Reading was no longer easy, no longer a comfortable controlled experience; the reader was now forced to control, to organize, to interpret" (25-26). Notice how elusive a commodity freedom becomes in Hutcheon's theorizing. When she says that reading is "no longer a controlled experience," one wonders whether Hutcheon means that the reading has been liberated from old interpretive conventions, or whether the reading process is simply out of control. When she says that the reader is "now forced to control, to organize, to interpret," the whole prospect of interpretive freedom is thrown into question, and made subject to designs supposedly embedded in the text.

Frame Conflict

Hutcheon's discussion provides many keen insights into the text's formal arrangement and significance, but her contention that readers respond differently to postmodern texts seems unconvincing. Throughout her argument Hutcheon asks us to accept the proposition that "new literary phenomena" engage readers in new forms of literary response. However, her narrative loses its momentum and finally stalls when her description of "a technically definable entity" (2) becomes frustrated by her attempts to gauge "the resulting implications for the *reader*" (3). Revolutionary changes in world view (akin to those articulated by the "New Rhetoric") are said to be embodied in postmoderist literature, and "the new role of the reader" is said to be "the vehicle of this change" (3). Yet, as her narrative unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear that, for the reader, little has really changed: readers of metafiction are "forced to control, to organize, to interpret" (26)--but "those increasing demands made on the reader" are not, she admits, "really new" (37); metafiction transforms "the process of making . . . into part of the shared pleasure of reading" (20)--but then "[r]eading and writing are both active creative exercises and always have been" (37). In the end, Hutcheon offers only the modest claim that "it is perhaps merely the degree of self-consciousness regarding [the] quasi-parallel natures [of reading and writing] that has increased" (37). The question of whether this increased degree of self-awareness provokes a *more* active engagement with the text remains unexplored, though the general trajectory of Hutcheon's argument (following that of Umberto Eco before her) suggests that it does.

I think it fair to say that Hutcheon's frame conflict regarding the contributory power of the empirical reader undermines her analysis of the reader encoded in the text. Her inability to articulate a model of perception is consistent with her failure to see the metaphorical potential of the Narcissus myth as a possible paradigm for self-conscious reading.[10] Her focus on the pool rather than the gaze seems an ironic "misreading" worthy of Narcissus himself. What makes Hutcheon's discussion of reading particularly valuable, though, is her willingness to recognize the limitations of her own theoretical position, and her resolve to move beyond those limitations. Four years after *Narcissistic Narrative*'s publication, Hutcheon revealed her uncertainty regarding the reader's power to determine form: somewhat apologetically she explains in her 1984 "Preface to the Paperback Edition," "If, in *Narcissistic Narrative*, I have tended to stress above all the power and freedom of the reader, it is a reflection of the impact in the seventies of all the varieties of reader-response criticism" (xv). Hutcheon here seems intent upon restricting our attention to the reader *in* the text; however, ironically enough, her claim that *Narcissistic Narrative* should be considered a product influenced by critical trends extrinsic to both the text and her own initial purposes only further undermines the concept of textual autonomy. If the author's reading of her own work changes with time, and if the prevailing critical ethos shapes the process of writing, then surely the reading of metafiction involves more than the simple decoding of patterns embedded in a supposedly autonomous and timeless text.

To her credit, in some of her work since *Narcissistic Narrative*, Hutcheon has re-examined the autonomy issue and refused the temptation to marginalize actual reading practices. In *A Theory of Parody*, she returns to the role of the reader and argues that "what is needed here is a broader notion of the conventions of reading" (116). The critical move allows her to speak less about reading processes (which inevitably involve questions of individual response and the psychology of reading) and more about predictable expectations that constrain an audience's interpretation. Once again, however, her position betrays a valorization of poetics at the expense of rhetoric: conventions of reading cannot be made any more synonymous with the conventions of the text than readers can; and discussion of reader conventions only makes Hutcheon's "objective" taxonomy of literary forms more difficult still. By the end of *A Theory of Parody*, the power of the reader still lacks definition. Whether conventions of reading are determined by new forms, or whether new forms are, in any significant sense, determined by changing conventions of reading remains unresolved. On the one hand, Hutcheon acknowledges her subject's rhetorical dimension when she recognizes that literary form (in particular, parody) can "be said to require a certain institutionized set of values--both aesthetic (generic) and social (ideological)--in order to be understood, or even to exist" (95); and yet, on the other hand, she never fully jettisons or integrates her belief (argued in *Narcissistic Narrative*) that texts, not readers, determine conventional reading habits. But if, as she says in *A Theory*, both the understanding and existence of literary form requires "a certain institutionalized set of values" (of expectations), then the linear, text-driven model of reading must go. We would do well to heed Frank Gloversmith's warning that to define "a text as an aesthetic monad [as Hutcheon's conception of postmodernist form comes dangerously close to doing] is to define reading as an ascesis, an intransitive response or intuitive recognition" (xiv-xv). Any theory of reading that effectively restricts its discussion to a catalogue of textual features can provide only a partial view of its subject. Discussion tends to be limited to the reader in the text, or to degrees of interpretive freedom accorded readers by so-called "open" and "closed" texts. The question of just what readers contribute to the text, or of how readers' collaboration affects our traditional notions of textuality, remains unanswered--though, as my introduction to Bowering, Atwood, and Kroetsch promises, these are questions crucial to our understanding of at least three contemporary Canadian narrators and their works.

Breaking the Frame: Notions of Intertextuality

Though references to models of reading processes are conspicuously sparse in her *Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon's project, I would argue, remains sympathetic to an exploration and definition of reading practices. She too maintains, after all, that "the text *qua* text has no fixed and final value in and for itself. It is not a closed and fetishized object, but an open process with an enunciative situation that changes with each receiver" (220). Yet, as promising as all this sounds, in chapter 8 of her book, the "open process" and the "receiver" are resolved into a sophisticated (but arhetorical) interpretation of "intertextuality." Hutcheon acknowledges the relevance of "prior discursive practices" (127), and she acknowledges that the notion of intertextuality "situates the locus of textual meaning within the history of discourse itself" (126). But the agents involved in these discursive practices and history are ignored. Without an elaborate and informed theory of reading and readers, the critical and pedagogical consequences of intertexuality tend to be rather conservative: we are likely to end up treating discursive practices, prior and present, as problematic figures in a remarkably familiar textual ground. What is missing is a detailed consideration of the social and collaborative dimensions of reading.

What is missing is a link between notions of intertextuality and Hutcheon's focus on enunciation. Hutcheon never really addresses the problem that, in a social sense, a writer's text does not become a text until it is read. Nor does she address how composition is conditioned by what has already been said and by what we anticipate others (that is, readers) may think or say. In short, Hutcheon never moves beyond her marvelously provocative starting point, that reading is part of the contextualized production and reception of meaning, and that "there exists a set of social relations between producer and audience that could perhaps be revolutionized by a change in the forces of production that would turn the reader into a *collaborator* instead of a consumer" (*Narcissistic* xv; emphasis added). Reading is a more profoundly collaborative act than is suggested in Hutcheon's critical narrative. If we are going to redefine the text as a shared, social, and collaborative space, we need to focus on more than the literal reminders (or "traces") of textual citation (allusions, quotations, and parodies). A rhetorical treatment of intertext, following James Porter's lead in "Intertextuality and the Discourse Community," would broaden the concept to include the writer's and reader's presuppositions that affect what can and cannot be said, what can and cannot be read. Porter maintains that presuppositions are assumptions made about the text, its referent, its readers, its social context, and its authorship; presupposition thus refers "to portions of the text which are read, but which are not explicitly 'there'" (35). As I shall argue further in chapter 2, epistemology constitutes the overarching intertextual presupposition for a rhetoric of reading. For now, it is enough to note that, in terms of reading theory, "intertextuality" is not the enemy of social collaboration: intertextuality is a social activity.

Hutcheon seems well aware that the anti-formalist positions she espouses may be at odds with her inherited formalist bias, for early on she declares postmodernism "a fundamentally contradictory enterprise" (23). "Within such an ideology," she says, "all a poetics of postmodernism would do would be self-consciously to enact the metalinguistic contradiction of being inside and outside, complicitous and distanced, inscribing and contesting its own provisional formulations" (21). Unresolved paradoxes and contradictions are embraced by her poetics, itself a "model of contradictions" seeking to foreground differences and hoping "to open up any poetics of postmodernism to plural, contestatory elements without necessarily reducing or recuperating them" (21). Such an ostensibly anti-foundationalist sentiment seems an unlikely complement to the range of formal categories ("metafiction," "parody," and "historiographic metafiction") taxonomized in her six related books of postmodernist literary theory;[11] but perhaps it could be argued that, given a "model of contradictions," conventional reasoning simply does not apply. Whatever the case, Hutcheon's extensive interrogation of postmodernist theory and practice does make us question conventional distinctions between product and process, literature and literary theory--and also the limits of literary interpretation and textuality.

Calls for Different Ways of Reading

Writers such as Bowering and Hutcheon, and Thomas Docherty in his recent work on reading character in postmodernist fiction, seek to provide a theoretical context for reading--one that challenges or at least resituates the conventions of reading that we associate with realist texts. In *Reading (Absent) Character: Towards a Theory of Characterization in Fiction*, Docherty argues that we

> require a new theoretical basis for our reading of [postmodern] fictions, one which will be adequate to their self-consciousness as *written* compositions, and which will take into account the linguistic interplay between writer and reader which goes on in the production of the text as it is read. (xiii)

Such theorizing and calls for different ways of reading would seem to suggest that, for these critics, a new theory must precede and guide the shape of reader response. On the surface, then, the focus on process and the aim of contextualizing reader-response would seem to support what I have been calling a rhetoric of reading. Docherty, like Hutcheon, however, presents his theory *as if* it were something endemic to postmodernist literary form--or, in other words, he either misses or ignores the rhetorical implications of postmodernist reading and falls back upon realist metaphors of textual autonomy. Epistemology is not a consistent critical variable in either Docherty's or Hutcheon's calculations.

Characteristically, these critics begin by acknowledging how postmodernist literature privileges the primacy of the reader as the maker of meaning: in realist fiction, says Docherty, "the activity of the reader is actually erased . . . for once the novel is read and the authorial message understood, then the actual process of reading the novel, of discovering (or actually constructing) that meaning can be legitimately forgotten" (xiii); conversely, in postmodernist fiction, "the activity of the reader in the production of meaning or of character is explicitly alluded to" (xiii). Claiming that his study offers "an examination of how we do in fact read such texts" (xv), Docherty concludes that postmodernist fiction "necessarily liberates the reader to experience ecstatically the new writing as a kinetic shifting of his or her own subjectivity" (239-40). The realist text, enforcing a rigidly hierarchical control over its reader, is closed, vertical, and "phallic" (239); the postmodernist text, inviting interpretive freedom, is open, horizontal, and given to the new rhetoric of democratization that Docherty finds at the heart of much recent "feminist" (239) writing. The crucial point here is that, despite the apparent focus on interpretive freedom, what critics such as Docherty are really interested in (or what they fall back upon) is a typology of determinate literary structures: they focus on form rather than reading, on poetics rather than rhetoric. The metaphors "vertical" and "horizontal" are, of course, staple elements in the contemporary narrative of realism and the development of prairie fiction in Canada. As I shall explore at some length in chapter 3, a schematic view based upon the binary opposition of metaphors has long dominated textual studies in Canada.

For Hutcheon, too, the difference between the realist text and the postmodernist text centres on structuralist notions of closure and openness, notions that are primarily metaphorical and implicitly tied to a realist view of texts and textual authority:

> The classic realist novel's well-made plot might give the reader the feeling of completeness that suggests, by analogy, *either* that human action is somehow whole and meaningful, *or* the opposite, in which case it is art alone that can impart any order or meaning to life. The modern, ambiguous, open-ended novel might suggest, on the other hand, less an obvious new insecurity or lack of coincidence between man's need for order and his actual experience of the chaos of the contingent world, than a certain curiosity about art's ability to produce "real" order, even by analogy, through the process of fictional construction. (*Narcissistic* 19)

The text, not the reader, determines interpretation; the postmodernist text, says Hutcheon, makes "a specific demand upon the reader, a demand for recognition of a new code, for a more open reading" (25). If Hutcheon's seemingly contradictory (but characteristic) description of enforced openness seems confusing, it is nonetheless a "paradox" central to her understanding of how we should read postmodernist discourse. It is a paradox she resolves by shifting her focus from the empirical reader to the reader in the text.

While the empirical reader of postmodernism is said to be "left with more than his usual share of freedom to create order" (152), the process of reading remains subject to the authority of the author and his creation:

> The author lets the reader complete the "open" work but he still, obviously, retains some control. It is "open" but in a field of relations (created by the novelist) which imply some sort of inner coherence. (152)

What may seem "obvious" to Hutcheon, however, can only be taken for granted if one ignores the world of empirical authors and readers, and deals instead with those hypothetical constructs, "the implied author" (Booth) and the "implied reader" (Iser). This is just what Hutcheon does. That Hutcheon waits until the penultimate chapter of *Narcissistic Narrative* before she discusses (in any detail) such a critical move betrays her desire to have it both ways. As Freund notes of Iser's critical stance (a posture praised by Hutcheon), the intent throughout most of Hutcheon's book is "to straddle two sides of a fence, one text-centred and hypothetical, the other reader-centred and empirical" (143). In the end, however, Hutcheon rejects the challenges of such a balancing act and retreats into the more familiar territory of formalist poetics.

Significantly she makes a point of rejecting "rhetorical" and "phenomenological" theories as "suggestive, but in no way definitive in their contributions to the understanding of narcissistic narrative" (152); her notion of the reader's freedom thus becomes necessarily limited to little more than an extension of the text's "implied" poetic structure. Hutcheon, initially promising to explore "the complex nature of reading (all reading)" (xii), narrows her focus and describes the postmodernist reading experience in terms of "[s]elf-interpreting texts" (152), a concept that, by definition, renders the reader's role redundant. The argument is circular: realist fiction presents a "closed" structure that limits reader participation (and the precise nature of that participation may be discovered through an examination of the text); similarly, postmodernist "open" forms *require* new levels of participation and creative freedom from their readers (and the nature of that freedom is defined by the text). Hutcheon does not seem to recognize in *Narcissistic Narrative* that the "field of relations" that produces literary meaning may not be under the sole authority of the author's text. It is only later, in *A Theory*, that she notes how postmodernist fiction requires "a certain institutionalized set of values--both aesthetic (generic) and social (ideological)--in order to be understood, or even to exist" (95). But too much attention to context and the conventions of reading would threaten the integrity of her "open"/"closed" taxonomy; thus, in *Narcissistic Narrative* (and, ironically, in *A Theory* and *A Poetics* as well) Hutcheon backs away from the rhetorical and phenomenological implications of reading postmodernist fiction, contenting herself instead with the realist belief that reading processes may be treated as an extension of a determinate literary structure. "When the model is the *text itself*," she claims, the problem of objectifying the model of reading "is undercut" (*Narcissistic* 145). But what is really undercut is the reader's role as a co-creator of meaning.

Despite her professed concern with process, Hutcheon cannot escape a fundamentally product-centred orientation; despite her consistent efforts to foreground the ideological premises of her own argument, Hutcheon's formalist bias lends a realist foundation to an ostensibly "anti-foundationalist," anti-realist theoretical position. In *Narcissistic Narrative* she locates her model "in the texts themselves"; and, again, in *A Poetics*, she seeks to ground her theory in physical form, finding in architecture the "best model for a poetics of postmodernism" (22). Physical form, interpreted through a filter of theorists such as Umberto Eco, and architect/theorists such as Charles Jenks and Paolo Portoghesi, gives her a useful formal analogue (and a framework) for reading postmodernist texts. The critical move has precedent in the work of Wylie Sypher, and others--though, clearly, it needs no precedent to justify itself as an intriguing line of inquiry. But to equate the building and viewing of architecture with the writing and reading of literature leads to an unfortunate undervaluing (if not a misrepresentation) of what makes language arts a distinct linguistic process. It is not surprising that, as Hutcheon says, unlike postmodernist literature, postmodernist architecture presents itself as an "uncontested . . . generally agreed upon corpus of works" (22). Buildings have a "corporeal" identity that works of literature simply do not share in anything but the most trivial of senses.

Formal parallels between literature and the plastic arts depend upon the assumption (most often associated with stylistics) that each age generates a *zeitgeist* that in turn informs the style of all contemporary art forms. Sypher, for example, in his extended analysis of stylistic variation from the Renaissance to twentieth-century cubism, "reads" literature in terms of formal schemata derived from his observations of the literature's immediate artistic context. Hutcheon pursues a similar course, sharing with Sypher the conviction that style constitutes an objectively verifiable property, as available to scrutiny in literature as it is in architecture. I have no fundamental quarrel with the notion of a *zeitgeist* or with the naming and listing of linguistic characteristics. However, I do question the supposed objective status of those listed traits and features.

Stylistic classification may create the impression that some new knowledge of form has been gained, but, no matter how seemingly inclusive, the typology always reflects the theoretical presuppositions of the typologist. What is worse, in theory, one could describe as many stylistic features as there are writers and works. Descriptors such as "Senecan" and "Ciceronian" (like "open" and "closed") seem specific enough until one takes a "Senecan Amble" with a scholar such as George Williamson and discovers fifty-seven varieties of stylistic types in the seventeenth century alone.[12] When form displays such potentially "infinite" variety, its typological status loses credibility. In short, we can treat literature as a compilation of formal characteristics, but we should not fool ourselves that the significance of those characteristics is objectively present in the text. Their significance, indeed their very existence, depends upon the context of their reception and of the reader's freedom to interpret.

Coming to Terms with Epistemology

Hutcheon's (and Docherty's) notions of open and closed forms, of course, owe much to Umberto Eco's theoretical formulations, wherein we find the same tendency toward paradox and contradiction. In his essay "The Poetics of the Open Work," Eco introduces the concept of an open text by way of an analogy to pieces of instrumental music. The reader, like a musician, "is not merely free to interpret the composer's instructions following his own discretion (which in fact happens in traditional music), but he must impose his judgement on the form of the piece, as when he decides how long to hold a note or in what order to group the sounds: all this amounts to an act of improvised creation" (*The Role* 47). Yet, in a later discussion of "Model Readers for open texts," Eco severely limits the range of reader-improvisation: "You cannot use the text as you want, but only as the text wants you to use it. An open text, however 'open' it be, cannot afford whatever interpretation" (9). Like Hutcheon, Eco invokes the reading processes of actual readers only to ignore them: in accord with Hutcheon's (and Iser's) sense of the implied reader, he states that "the reader is strictly defined by the lexical and the syntactical organization of the text. And then Eco adds the kind of fence-straddling proposition that so complicates Hutcheon's poetics: "the text is nothing else but the semantic-pragmatic production of its own Model Reader" (10). One commentator, William Ray, interprets Eco as saying that "[r]eading is neither a production of textual structures nor a response to them, but both at once" (133). But while such an interactive program would lay the groundwork for the kind of rhetorical interplay of author, text, and reader that this present study explores, Eco, I think, has something else in mind. His seemingly circular description of the reader-text relationship betrays a calculated ambiguity: Ray infers that in the second half of Eco's formulation, the Model Reader is in control of the "semantic-pragmatic" production; but, by the same token, the sentence may be read as simply a restatement of the principal proposition that the reader is produced by the text. Indeed, in practice, Eco allows the reader no more true freedom than either Hutcheon or Docherty.

Thus, while his rhetorical proposition seems to integrate the reader, Eco's reverence for the text actually banishes consideration of the reader just as surely as if he had openly invoked the "affective fallacy" of New Critical thought. A poetics of open and closed forms provides a useful interpretive frame only so long as the reading process is not regarded as an independent variable. As Ray quite rightly notes, only "by reneging on the dialectical promise of his theory and postulating a textual structure transcendent of reading acts . . . can Eco reinstill his epistemological privilege and justify his authority" (134) as a critic. Eco allows that texts "can be read in various ways, each way being independent from the others" (9); but, to distinguish between what he terms "closed" and "open" texts, he must insist that multiple readings "cannot happen with those [he] call[s] 'open' texts: they work at their peak revolutions per minute only when each interpretation is reechoed by the others, and vice versa" (9). The distinction is, of course, untenable, for the reading strategies of naive and experienced readers alike regularly (and in the case of deconstructionists, deliberately) subvert the kind of interpretive accord that Eco claims for his "open" texts.

Empirical readers and their collective reading conventions become something of an embarrassment to the theorist seeking to establish a clear-cut poetics of realist (closed) and postmodernist (open) forms. But, for those of us interested in understanding reading's rhetorical character, an appreciation of actual processes remains crucial. Simply incorporating insights gleaned from sister disciplines is not enough, however. A rhetoric of reading must speak coherently to the issues of process and epistemology raised by writers such as Hutcheon, Docherty, and Eco. We need to begin by agreeing that our theory of reading is linked to our theory of knowledge, and that both have consequence for the way we read texts; and, also, that understanding reading gives us insight into the ways we see and understand ourselves and our world. If literary authors such as Bowering, Atwood, and Kroetsch have focused on reading and problematized questions of interpretation, they have done so to argue that reading must be treated as an extension of one's epistemology. To ignore the epistemological question is to condemn readers to the colonized interpretive strategies of a realist world view, a view that holds reality and texts to be unmediated and thus directly knowable.[13] The more self-conscious we become about epistemology, the more our reading (and writing) focuses on questions of process and the forces that influence that process. Thus the tendency for contemporary Canadian authors to "teach theory" when they write exemplifies a coherent rhetorical extension of their shared postmodern epistemology. The question for a rhetoric of reading then becomes one of exploring epistemology as *topos*, as the anticipatory schema that both shapes cognitive processes and is itself shaped by social and cultural contexts. The crucial aspect of such an exploration involves a dual perspective that not only characterizes the schema (or competing schemata), but seeks to provide either a theoretical or narrative account of the schema's social significance. For just as readings of literary works argue for a particular view of a text, so the theories of reading we hold (or deny) argue for a particular world view. Practice and theory are thoroughly rhetorical and functionally indivisible: one asserts power over a text, while the other establishes (consciously or unconsciously) the political and ethical power to authorize the interpretation. In the following chapter I shall develop these notions and indicate the ways in which a dialogue between reading theory and the discourse of rhetoric provides terms of reference that take us beyond the monologues of more conventional disciplinary inquiry. In particular, I shall examine how the metaphors of oral communication (the province of classical rhetoric) are variously invoked and employed as both a reconceptualization of reading practices and a critique of the old, realist episteme.

NOTES

[1] What Bowering, Atwood, and Kroetsch are teaching their readers was anticipated in many ways by prose writers of the Romantic movement. As John Nabholtz argues, "much of the most original prose of the early nineteenth century undertook the education of the reader *as reader* by attempting to break conventional habits of response, in some cases by engineering a direct confrontation with those habits" (*My Reader* 9).

[2] For an enlightening discussion of machine metaphors and the "worlds" that a reliance on such metaphors "builds," see Wayne Booth's chapter on "Metaphoric Worlds: Myths, Their Creators and Critics" in *The Company We Keep.*

[3] This ostensibly paradoxical phenomenon has been reviewed and "confirmed" by C. Juel in "Comparison of Word Indentification Strategies with Varying Context, Word Type and Reader Skill."

[4] Kenneth Bruffee provides a comprehensive survey of the social constructivist model and its adherents in "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'."

[5] The literature on how children learn to read is full of discussions on how the acquisition of competence must begin with cognitive awareness (some sense of the meaningfulness and rhetorical complexity of the task at hand). However, because educational psychologists tend to equate competence in reading with "efficient processing" and "word recognition," they do not recognize periodic metacognitive awareness of linguistic operations (for example, when learning something new or difficult) as a prerequisite for reading at all levels of proficiency. See John Downing's *Reading and Reasoning*; Ignatius G. Mattingly's "Reading, the Linguistic Process, and Linguistic awareness"; and Linnea C. Ehri's "Linguistic Insight: Threshold of Reading Acquisition."

[6] Gillian Brown and George Yule offer a useful introduction to the subtle differences between these analogous concepts. See especially chapter 7, "Coherence in the Interpretation of Discourse," in *Discourse Analysis.* For a more in-depth discussion of schemata and the metaphors theorists use to describe conceptual models, see Asghar Iran-Negad's "The Schema: A Long-Term Memory Structure or a Transient Structural Phenomena."

[7] Endorsing Susanne Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key*, Louise Wetherbee Phelps argues that "the great generative ideas that periodically arise to transform our intellectual enterprises [change] the very terms in which we frame our questions and conceive our purposes" ("Dialectics of Coherence" 12).

[8] Dale Bauer also quotes this key Bakhtinian notion, and adds that "[t]his internal clash of competing voices creates the split between the authoritative and the internally persuasive, between the desire to conform and the desire to resist . . . (*Feminist Dialogics* 7).

[9] See Donald A. Schön's "Generative Metaphor: A Perspective on Problem-Setting in Social Policy" and Michael J. Reddy's elaboration in "The Conduit Metaphor--A Case of Frame Conflict in Our Language about Language."

[10] A more detailed (more rhetorical) treatment of the Narcissus myth and its relevance to critical reading is offered by Marshall W. Alcorn, Jr. in "Rhetoric, Projection, and the Authority of the Signifier."

[11] In addition to the works discussed in the preface and chapter 1, Hutcheon's recently published *Splitting Images* extends her thesis that postmodernism's "power of contestation is limited: postmodernism is not the radical, utopian oppositionality of the modernist avant garde. Instead it questions the very act--and authority--of taking a position, any position, even an oppositional one that assumes a discursive situation exterior to that which is being opposed" (140).

[12] See Williamson's *The Senecan Amble*.

[13] For an informed and useful discussion of realist presuppositions and their relationship to postmodernism, see Alison Lee's *Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction*--especially chapter 1 on "Realism and its Discontents."

CHAPTER TWO

Reading and the Metaphor of Conversation

The yolking together of the words "rhetoric" and "reading" presents a relatively new notion, and, as the work of Linda Flower might suggest, we need to review the function and scope of rhetoric as it relates to a theory of reading contemporary literary discourse. The history of attempts to import rhetoric into either literary theory or reading theory is conspicuously brief, but it does suggest a useful frame of inquiry.

The word "rhetoric" has recently found favour with some notoriously anti-rhetorical critics. Paul de Man, for example, in his preface to *Allegories of Reading*, claims that his book provides "a theory of reading" which "could, in principle, lead to a rhetoric of reading" (ix). De Man does not claim to have worked out a rhetoric of reading; he sets it forward as a possibility. "What emerges," he promises, "is a process of reading in which rhetoric is a descriptive intertwining of trope and persuasion or--which is not quite the same thing--of cognitive and performative language" (ix). But what really emerges in his opening chapter, "Semiology and Rhetoric," is a rather arbitrary restriction of rhetoric's relevance to "the study of tropes and figures" (6). Discussion of process, persuasion, and cognition find little place in a study which takes as its starting point the proposition that the "existence of grammatical structures, within and beyond the unit of the sentence, in literary texts is undeniable, and their description and classification are indispensable" (7). In a patently Ramist gesture, rhetoric becomes simply a collection of figures to be "included in such a taxonomy" (7). De Man may offer a kind of rhetoric of reading--but it is one that equates reading with grammatical structure and robs "rhetoric" of its social significance. The whole question of distinguishing an epistemology of rhetoric becomes, for de Man, "a redoubtable task" (7).

Closer to the rhetorical tradition are the conclusions of J. Hillis Miller and Terry Eagleton, who recommend rhetoric as a way of examining discursive practices, "forms of power and performance" (205) as Eagleton puts it. "Nothing," says Miller, "is more urgently needed these days in humanistic study than the incorporation of the rhetorical study of literature into the study of the historical, social, and ideological dimensions of literature" (7). Miller argues for an "ethics of reading," which he sees in terms of an inaugural moment of contest between necessity and free will:

> By "the ethics of reading" . . . I mean that aspect of the act of reading in which there is a response to the text that is both necessitated, in the sense that it is a response to a demand, and free, in the sense that I must take responsibility for my response and for the further effects, "interpersonal," institutional, social, political, or historical, of my act of reading, for example as that act takes the form of teaching or of published commentary on a given text. (43)

Again, like de Man, Miller sees rhetoric and ethics as discourses that will take us beyond a focus on reading's epistemological aspect. Nowhere, however, does he explain how we can adopt an ethical and metacritical stance without first addressing questions of epistemology.

Eagleton focuses more directly on the social function of texts, and thus leaves the epistemological question open but at least relevant. Though he talks a good deal about the conditions of reading, he offers no detailed discussion of process. Rhetoric is invoked, rather, as a reminder that reading involves "effects" produced "in particular readers in actual situations" (205), and that such acts are both "'creative' as well as 'critical'" (207). What

Eagleton does do is help popularize the critical shift in focus from textual to social structures.

Reading as Conversation

Reading has become, for many theorists, a matter of "conversation"--an eminently rhetorical art. Tropes more commonly associated with orality than literacy now frequently replace or augment the conduit metaphors of the old episteme. Indeed, even a cursory glance at recent attempts to conceptualize the reading process reveals a startling reliance upon the conversation metaphor. Richard Rorty speaks of critical practice in terms of "the conversation of mankind" (*Philosophy and the Mirror* 389); Don Bialostosky, following Bakhtin, constructs a "Dialogics as an Art of Discourse in Literary Criticism"; Frank Lentricchia discusses the concept in his *Criticism and Social Change* (especially pages 160-62); Dale Bauer proposes "a model for reading based on a feminist dialogics, on the translations of the gaze (of the community, of reading) into hearing dialogized voices" (*Feminist Dialogics* 4); Patrocinio P. Schweickart writes of the author and reader as two participants "engaged in intimate conversation" ("Reading Ourselves" 52); Wayne Booth introduces his recent book, *The Company We Keep*, as a "conversation" between writer and reader (ix); Kenneth Bruffee considers the view that "conversation and thought are causally related" ("Collaborative Learning" 640); Gregory Clark's monograph, *Dialogue, Dialectic, and Conversation*, describes conversation as "a vigorous explanatory metaphor for the social function of discourse" (50), and calls for reading to be viewed as a "collaborative exchange that makes writer and readers equal partners in the continuous process of redefining their commonality" (59); and in *Rhetorical Power*, Steven Mailloux self-consciously rehearses his adoption of the conversation metaphor, tracing its origin to Kenneth Burke's elaboration in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. The conversation metaphor has considerable appeal, for it provides both an alternative to the container metaphors of the realist paradigm and an extension of the orientational metaphors that, according to contemporary psycholinguists, describe how we interact with texts.[1] But rather than simply cite examples and variations of this shared critical perspective, let me offer a narrative of its development and rhetorical significance.

Kenneth Burke's *The Philosophy of Literary Form* and, especially, *A Rhetoric of Motives* anticipate much that has been published (since the mid-1940s) on rhetoric's relevance to contemporary literary studies, particularly with regard to the New Rhetoric's tendency to emphasize the suasive motive of all discourse and thus to blur categorical distinctions between didactic and non-didactic narrative. Burke opens his *Rhetoric* by rehearsing commonplace assumptions about the special, self-contained status of poetic language:

> Whereas poetic language is a kind of symbolic action, for itself and in itself, and whereas scientific action is a preparation for action, rhetorical language is inducement to action (or to attitude, attitude being an incipient act). (42)

Very soon, however, it becomes clear that such distinctions simply will not hold, for rhetoric "*is rooted in an essential function of language itself*" (43); and all language in use should properly be regarded "*as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols*" (43). Or, as he asserts later, "Wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is 'meaning,' there is 'persuasion'" (172).

For Burke, the rhetoric of literature (and, by implication, the rhetoric of reading) regards poetic constructs not as finished public products, but as part of an "unending conversation" among motivated parties. Discourse is suasory in the sense that, during such a conversation, the parties engage in a form of epistemic exploration: our view of reality changes, our mutual "knowledge" grows when we explore the world through the exchange of symbols. Like bpNichol, Burke sees the reading and writing of literature in terms of a "new humanism" whereby readers and writers communicate, seeking to find "as many exits as possible from the self . . . in order to form as many entrances as possible for the other" (qtd. in Scobie, *bpNichol* 16). The emphasis here is upon human agency and process--or, as Burke would have it in his famous description of rhetoric in action, a drama of "symbolic interaction":

> Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceeded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion has already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone on before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (*The Philosophy* 94-6)

As I have noted above, the conversation metaphor has assumed major significance as a way of conceptualizing critical reading. Somewhat closer to home, Burke's "parlor" finds a striking Canadian counterpart in Kroetsch's description of a prairie beer parlour wherein the participants rejoice in performance, soliloquy and diatribe. As Kroetsch puts it, we hear "in the beer-talk of our daily lives, the shape of our living" (*Lovely Treachery* 17). The ritual of beer drinking, the "sharing with each other of values, of pleasures, of aspirations, of suffering" (18), becomes a metaphor for art as a ritual act encouraging the active participation of both writer and reader. The text, like the "sacred place of the beer parlour" (18), allows its participants to change identities--in our laughter, in our silence, in the stories we tell, in what we remember from the past" (18). The story is ongoing and tied to notions of process and the rhetorical situation: "the story in the act of retelling is always responsive to individuals, to the place, the invention" (*Labyrinths* 13).

To read, therefore, requires an exiting from the self, for one's epistemic field (as Burke says of ideology in his "Lexicon Rhetoricae") does not constitute a static and "harmonious structure of beliefs or assumptions" (*Terms* 15); when we read, we risk exposing our beliefs to further change and, in the process, we inevitably adapt to an "other's" world view. Thus Burke concludes, it "is by such aligning of assumptions [of beliefs] that poetry contributes to the formation of attitudes, and thus to the determining of conduct" (*Terms* 16).

Although Burke's rhetoric of motives cannot be said to define a rhetoric of reading, it does introduce a number of essential elements: in rhetorical terms, any treatment of reading must preserve a consideration of human agency and motives; literature should be viewed as language in use and thus as at least partially defined by the process of reading; a rhetoric of reading should be fundamentally "epistemic"--part of the shaping of beliefs through the social construction of knowledge;[2] and reading may be usefully regarded as part of an unending conversation.

In perhaps the most celebrated importation of rhetoric into literary studies, Wayne Booth (in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*) enters the conversation by addressing himself to the question of how an author imposes his fictional world upon the reader. In the process he elaborates upon notions of the "implied author" and the "implied reader," linking the relationship between authors and readers to Aristotle's famous definition of rhetoric as "the faculty of discovering in the particular case all the available means of persuasion"(7).

Aristotle distinguishes between two forms of persuasion, "artistic" and "non-artistic": artistic means of persuasion are supplied by the speaker's invention and are said to be found *in* the art; non-artistic means of persuasion are those not supplied by the speaker's own efforts, but come from *outside*--such as witnesses, forced confessions, contracts, all external to the art of speaking. Of the two kinds of persuasions discussed by Aristotle, Booth fixes attention on the artistic, limiting discussion to the dynamics of persuasion controlled by the author and represented by surrogate authors and readers embedded in the text.

Booth, however, harbours no illusions that his study exhausts the rhetoric of literary reading and writing:

> I am aware that in pursuing the author's means of controlling his reader I have arbitrarily isolated technique from all of the social and psychological forces that affect authors and readers. ("Preface" i)

While his focus stays close to the text and thus reflects a residual "product" orientation, Booth's notion of literary technique as the "art of communication with readers" (i), and his recognition of the suasory power of so-called "non-didactic" fiction, reaffirms Burke's conclusions and lays the groundwork for a more comprehensive view of literature as an interactive process. Indeed, redefining the "art of communicating with readers" in terms of the suasory power of discourse (all discourse) makes it difficult to confine the reader's role to a script located solely within the text. Not surprisingly, then, a decade later in *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, Booth revises his implied rhetoric of reading:

> It is no good arguing here, as I did in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, that I can become temporarily a kind of "implied reader" whose beliefs match those of the "implied author," himself in turn a character who may or may not have any direct relationship to the real man who wrote the book. There my problem was how books get themselves read. Here the problem is, What should we let them do to us *as we read them*? (182; emphasis added)

The focus shifts from a realist concern for product to a rhetorical (postmodernist) concern for process. Or, in classical rhetorical terms, the new focus begins to blur distinctions between what Aristotle called artistic and non-artistic means of persuasion: that which was traditionally regarded to be situated *outside* art is now embraced as an essential element of the discourse.

Even more dramatically (as Kroetsch's abnegation of self in the "sacred place of the beer parlour" implies), when we shift to a process orientation, the borderlines between self and other become increasingly difficult to draw. Booth explores these new considerations and identifies concerns fundamental to a rhetoric of reading:

> What happens if we think of our selves as essentially participants in a field or process or mode of *being persons together*? If man is essentially a rhetorical animal, in the sense that his nature is discovered and lived only in symbolic process, then the whole world shifts: every usage of words like *I*, *my*, *mine*, *self*, must be reconsidered, because the borderlines between the self and the other have either disappeared or shifted sharply. (*Modern Dogma* 134)

Again, then, when we begin to define the contemporary field for rhetorical inquiry, Burke's notion of discourse as both an unending conversation and as fundamentally epistemic seems crucial to understanding reading. Further, questioning the borderlines between self and other makes it difficult to confine a rhetoric of reading to a consideration of the reader alone: the entrance of the reader into literary theory invites "as many entrances as possible for the other"--including the author.

It is not until Ross Winterowd's "The Rhetorical Transaction of Reading," however, that we find a direct attempt to understand the relationship between rhetoric and reading--and, significantly, Winterowd defines reading as a conversation that takes place between author and reader through the medium of text. Anticipating the objectives of researchers such as Flower and Haas, he offers rhetoric as a "method of organization and as a heuristic" (185) whereby psycholinguistic reading theory can be conceptualized in terms of the three classical *pisteis*: *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*.

While psycholinguistic theories of reading treat both the mechanical skills necessary for translating *logos* into meaning and the importance of the reader's prior knowledge, motivations and attitudes (*pathos*), reading theory "has almost nothing to say that bears on *ethos* [the presence of the author]" (187). A rhetorical approach to reading, on the other hand, stresses a correspondence between the reader and the author as co-creators of meaning: both parties participate in activities accommodated by the classical department of invention. The reader, of necessity, must invent "more or less clearly, a concept of intention and hence supply a writer" (188). Accordingly, "We cannot escape from the rhetorical, pathetic, intentional fallacy" (190); "intention," says Winterowd, "is the fulcrum upon which the weight of the [literary] work can be swung" (188). And swing it must, for despite literature's apparent invitation to contemplate it "*as if it were* an artifact" (191), literature remains a symbolic action inseparable from human motives and activities.

Any mention of authorial intent is, of course, likely to provoke more than a few raised eyebrows, especially among those who have become all too familiar with arbitrary pronouncements and logical conundrums offered by some critics who cite intention as a means of validating interpretation. However, within a rhetorical framework where authors and readers alike are not merely individuals but a "field of selves" (Booth, *Modern Dogma* 126), we need not worry about the rather reductive notion of individualized intention that so troubled New Critical thought and still guides those contemporary critics seeking absolute validity in interpretation. An author's intentions are not independent variables separable from the universe of discourse in which they participate (and through which they are defined); and only those who wish to uphold the realist belief in an independent self should be troubled by our very human inability to distinguish between intention and inference. We need not worry that "pure" intention will remain ultimately irrecoverable, or that the author's intention may be unfulfilled or unfulfillable. It is enough that our attention to *ethos* and epistemology--our consideration of an author's social context, personal history, successive manuscript drafts, related works, etc.--provides us with what Kenneth Burke calls "a high class kind of gossip that is often worth the effort" ("The Principle" 191). Indeed, I would argue that without such "gossip" our ongoing conversation with literature (including our published interpretations) could not continue. Even if we regard the author as a necessary fiction, the process of literary interpretation demands that we posit an "author" as an intentional force. To believe otherwise would deprive reading (and writing) of all social relevance. It would also deny (or off-handedly dismiss) the responses of readers, such as Constance Rooke, who declare a "heretical belief in the existence of the author" as a prerequisite to critical reading:

> Fearfully, but with an open heart, I confess that this is so: for me the author lives. I do not only play with 'texts'; very often I imagine that in the act of reading I am encountering, let us say, Phyllis Webb. And if I as a sophisticated reader believe this (as I know many other readers do), then it contains a truth of some kind, and theory ought to account for it with something other than modish disdain. (*Fear* 9)

The authors themselves, of course, care about intention: "Quite frequently," says Bowering,

> I am bothered by the old question of "the author's intention." As an author I am aware that my intention is important to me, something I dont like to see mistaken. But I am also aware that I court conditions . . . under which my intentions will be thwarted, whereby my will will be subverted" (*Errata* 86)

And Robert Kroetsch, in his reading of Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli's *A Mazing Space*, offers his own understanding of the author's function--an understanding that highlights the importance of the author as an aspect of what bpNichol termed the "new humanism":

> The life of the author and the presence of the writer are both relevant to the text. Behind both the act of writing and the production of the text is indeed a life. This life is not to be treated in a simple thematic way. This life is somehow to be valued, and, further, this life is to be recognized as one that

> has been marked by extremes of dismissal. (*Lovely Treachery* 197)

These writers do not voice a call for a return to some naive brand of biographical criticism; they do, however, refuse to marginalize the significance of the author as a vital participant in the creative enunciation of meaning. "Somehow" we are to value the life of the author within an intellectual climate that has repeatedly and forcefully pronounced the author dead.

A rhetoric of reading must account for the invocation of the author, and, in so doing, rehabilitate notions of authorial intention as something other than the "decisive criterion of what a text means" (Juhl, *Interpretation* 12). Furthermore, to construct a rhetoric of reading means that we must understand the epistemological underpinnings that help constitute the rhetorical situation (the shared space where author, reader, text, and social forces meet); and thus, in constructing such a rhetoric, we are inevitably defining a salient aspect of authorial intention, for if the author (like the reader) may be regarded as a "field of selves" constituted by social interaction, then understanding both the process of interaction and the epistemology that helps shape that interaction should bring us closer to an understanding of the author's "motives." Again, then, a rhetoric of reading, like reading itself, is necessarily epistemic.

Although their interests are not explicitly "rhetorical," reader-response critics have engaged many of the foregoing issues, especially the issue of the text's autonomy. For the most part, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, David Bleich, Norman Holland, Hans Robert Jauss and the Konstanz school of *Rezeptionsästhetik*, tend to treat the notion of authorial intention as a mute point, focusing instead on the interaction between reader and text (and, to some extent, context). Jane Tompkins' "Introduction" to *Reader-Response Criticism* provides both a useful overview and a movement toward an integration of rhetorical principles into the theorizing of reader response. Tompkins' narrative of reading theory emphasizes a growing concern with notions of autonomy, and she calls the new focus on the reader and reading an "epistemological revolution":

> Relocating meaning first in the reader's self and then in the interpretive strategies that constitute it, they [reader-response critics] assert that meaning is a consequence of being in a particular situation in the world. The net result of this epistemological revolution is to repoliticize literature and literary criticism. When discourse is responsible for reality and not merely a reflection of it, then whose discourse prevails makes all the difference. (xxv)

Such a view of language as power has its roots in ancient Greece, among "the Greek rhetoricians who believed that speech was a 'great prince' able to transform human experience" (xxv). And certainly, in terms of the New Rhetoric, issues of self, rhetorical context, epistemology, and power continue to dominate.

Tompkins concludes her anthology of reader response with two questions of considerable concern to a rhetoric of reading:

> What makes one set of perceptual strategies or literary conventions win out over another? [And] if the world is the product of interpretation, then who or what determines which interpretive system will prevail? (226)

As their position on the final page of her concluding article suggests, these two questions are points of departure for further exploration. Nonetheless, Tompkins' questions help frame the kind of issues (both conceptual and ethical) that make the working out of a rhetoric of reading a critical imperative.

The first specific call for a "rhetoric of reading," since de Man, comes from Nan Johnson, who, in an article on the rhetorical implications of reader-response criticism, argues that we need to establish a "theoretical bridge between reader-response and rhetorical views of the *pathos* principle" (164); but it is her student, Douglas Brent, who offers us the first detailed and extensive rhetoric on the topic.[3] Echoing both Burke and Booth, he argues that "knowledge exists as a consensus of many individual knowers, a consensus that is negotiated through the medium of discourse in an unending conversation that involves all humanity" (1). "Moreover," he maintains,

> a rhetoric of reading must take into account the place of reading in the epistemic conversation of mankind. This means that it must account for . . . the ultimate goal of up-dating a belief system or 'worldview,' a theory about the way the world operates and about the way in which the believer can and should operate within it. (29)

As promising as this synthesis of social constructivist thought and rhetorical theory sounds, Brent's rhetoric has little new to say about the process of reading literature. Instead he wishes to construct a general theory that can explain how we read "non-literary" prose--specifically, the research paper. His introduction makes it clear that "the inquiry will be confined to a specific kind of reading: not the reading of literature for the purpose of aesthetic enjoyment, but the reading of non-literary sources for the purpose of building knowledge" (2). Determined to show how an appreciation of reading theory can help students write better research papers, Brent restricts his pedagogical focus and looks for ways of excluding the reading of literature from his model. His strategy is both complex and subtle, and since much of the present discussion hinges on the notion that reading postmodernist literature does ask us to participate in the social construction of knowledge, his logic requires careful review.

Brent begins by confining the relevance of literary theory to the domain of literary texts, a critical move that allows him to conclude that only if there is no crucial difference between literary and non-literary reading "can we confidently generalize a rhetoric of reading from literary theory alone" (40). While he admits that literature is rhetorical in that it constitutes "a means by which the writer contributes to the building of the reader's value system" (40), Brent's *a priori* distinction between the literary and the non-literary leads him to the disturbing conclusion that "[l]iterary texts . . . form only a portion of the sources contributing to any given person's value system, and in many domains of inquiry, they play no overt part at all" (40). Literary reading thus becomes effectively marginalized as an aesthetic pursuit only incidentally concerned with the contest of beliefs. The problem here, as we have already discussed, is that if all discourse shares a suasory purpose, then segregating the purpose of reading literature from other modes of knowledge formation would seem to contradict a premise basic to New Rhetorical theories of language.

Although he has a great deal to say about the process of reading, and although he remains generally faithful to rhetorical principles, Brent offers a perspective on literature that deviates little from the assumptions that guided New Critical thought some fifty years ago. His model of the way readers and writers interact makes a valuable contribution to composition pedagogy, but it simply does not speak directly to the issue of how we read literary narratives (much less postmodern narratives). In essence, we are presented with a rhetoric conceived within a realist episteme: a rhetoric that sees literature as removed from daily discourse--a rhetoric that wishes to focus exclusively on "the act of reading texts for which there is no assumption of fictivity" (42). As we shall see in chapter 3, the realist's faith in the possibility of a realist discourse uncontaminated by assumptions of fictivity does not stand up to postmodernist scrutiny. What would Brent's rhetoric do with George Bowering's belief that for "the reader, reality can only exist in the fiction" ("Painted Window" 116)? Or Robert Kroetsch's famous dictum that "the fiction makes us real" ("A Conversation" 63)? My point here is not to criticize Brent for failing to accommodate the postmodernist perspectives of a Bowering or a Kroetsch. Brent simply does not recognize postmodernism as related to the epistemological focus of the New Rhetoric, and thus he never addresses questions regarding the relevance of postmodernist views on reading. On a more positive note, whatever his realist bias, Brent's movement toward a rhetoric of reading suggests a valuable point of departure for an enhanced understanding of postmodernist discourse and interpretation.

Theorizing the Rhetorical Situation

Both the potential and the limitations of Brent's contributions to the developing narrative of reading theory may be seen in his treatment of the "rhetorical situation." Faithful to the work of Lloyd Bitzer, he defines the rhetorical situation as a combination of external forces and individual motivations which provokes "a general need to make knowledge through discourse" (68). These external forces (community beliefs, documents, facts, traditions, etc.) present yet another version of Aristotle's non-artistic persuasions--and just as Aristotle limited his attention to intrinsic factors alone, so Brent focuses on individual psychology and motivation rather than social construction *per se*. Social forces are acknowledged, as are intertextual influences; but such concerns are ultimately resolved into the notion of "a virtual work," an abstraction that Brent claims is produced in the mind of the reader during the process of reading. We do not decode a preexistent text; we recreate (or co-create) a new text every time we read. Only those aspects of the text and context that contribute toward the creation of the virtual text of the moment are of rhetorical consequence.

The virtual work results from unspecified social influences, memories of past readings or of other related texts, so that any specific text under consideration will inevitably reflect a "constellation" of relevant experiences. If all this sounds far too intricate and removed from the pleasure of reading Bowering, Atwood, and Kroetsch, let me suggest here that understanding the problematics (and the artistic potential for metaphor and theme) inherent in defining the processes of reading and writing is a crucial factor in understanding the rhetorical aspect of their narratives. The problem of resolving what's *out there* with what's in the text is a familiar theme to both postmodernist discourse and a rhetoric of reading. Bowering, for example, describes the process of composition in terms that are closely aligned to those used by Brent:

> Suppose that you are writing a novel. Let us call it a book. Let us suppose that like many writers, like Ethel Wilson in *Swamp Angel*, for example, you are trying to get the world right in your book, or, say, right into it. But really, if you should succeed in getting the world right in your book, you cant do it again that way, because now the world contains that book you have been writing. You would have to get the world, including now that book, right in that book. And you were probably not intending that at all. But at first the world did not contain that book and now it does. Your book, accepting both worlds, becomes discontinuous and plural, but is a world you are trying to get right like that? Maybe you can get the world right in your book for one sentence, and (but) then the world changes sentence by sentence because now your sentences are in it. I think that that is probably true, and it is exciting, a reason to go on in the world. (*Errata* 9)

Meaning, according to both Brent and Bowering, is not found *in* the text; meaning is evoked through an interaction between the text and the reader's (and writer's) experience relevant to an understanding of the text. As Brent describes it, "[t]extual elements do not just either have or not have presence [rhetorical significance]; they have it in greater and lesser degree and may acquire it and lose it according to the progress of a rhetorical transaction" (70).

For Brent, though, the rhetorical situation is not a "situation" at all--not in any conventional physical or social sense. It is rather the residue of a physical and social interaction. Resolved, like Brent's idea of a text, into a psychological abstraction, "rhetorical situation" becomes (1) synonymous with the reader's purpose and (2) recognizable in terms of performance. As we saw in Flower's model of the reader as "arch negotiator," reading thus conceived may be treated as a matter of getting answers to individual questions: "in order to decide what to believe, the reader will actively search for specific pieces of material that relate to the question he is asking" (41). On the one hand, the reader works his or her way through the text, mining it for its relevance to a guiding research question; on the other hand, the research question is "constantly shifting," for the "very act of acquiring answers, or partial answers, to some questions inevitably throws up new ones" (70).

Brent's decision to restrict the rhetorical situation to an essentially psychological domain strikes me as eminently sensible and pragmatic. After all, it is one thing to claim that understanding can only be achieved within a parliament of competing propositions, but it is quite another matter to provide a truly comprehensive account identifying each relevant factor of the communication process. The disturbing aspect of his decision, however, is Brent's insistence that a rhetoric of reading so formulated nonetheless provides a "general theory enunciating principles that can explain acts of reading in various domains" (39). Such a totalizing tendency suggests that, despite a sophisticated grasp of discourse's unending and participatory nature, Brent remains determined to have the last word.

While the social forces that construct meaning are implicit in the notions of both the virtual work and the rhetorical situation, and while his rhetoric provides an elegant explanation of how and why meaning changes every time we read, Brent's description of the process in action makes it sound all rather clinical and benign. Metaphors of conversation and negotiated meaning imply the need for at least some consideration of conflict and relative power among participants in the discourse. What Brent's rhetoric lacks is some acknowledgement of reading's ideological dimension, and he needs to show how ideologies contest one another in the "Wrangle of the Market Place, the flurries and flare-ups of the Human Barnyard" (Burke, *A Rhetoric* 23). For as Burke argues, ideological assumptions (beliefs) are never harmonious: "[a]n ideology is an aggregate of beliefs sufficiently at odds with one another to justify opposite kinds of conduct" ("Lexicon Rhetoricae" 15). When ways of knowing (epistemology) become a matter of belief (or beliefs in conflict), then a rhetoric of reading must find ways of imbricating narratives of ideology. Despite the relative strength of our particular ideological orientations, we are always open to persuasion: when we read we may quite literally change our minds, and, in the process, our "selves." As I have already noted, questions of identity and the process by which we create ourselves through narrative are areas of concern central to both postmodernist discourse and rhetoric.

Indeed, according to Mary Louise Pratt, the presence of potentially competing viewpoints forms a distinguishing characteristic not only within individual readers, but within communities of readers:

> Knowledge is interested, and interest implies conflict; to advance an interpretation is to insert it into a network of power relations. Indeed, it is fair to say that much of the "confidence" and passion people display in their beliefs is precisely conditioned by the presence of threatening alternatives. ("Interpretive" 52)

Passion, confidence, and the dynamics of human belief, however, cannot be incorporated neatly into any theoretical model; no matter how comprehensive it tries to be, no single theory can possibly detail the infinite variety of social relations that impinge upon the process of reading. And even if we were able to isolate all the factors that help construct discourse, and even if we could treat them thoroughly, there is no guarantee that we would then produce an objective account of the reading process: for there is no way to establish a theoretical position *outside* the discourse. Only a rhetoric worked out inductively and in conversation with competing viewpoints can offer a satisfactory response to the ubiquitous (and very postmodernist) question, "How do we read?".

While we cannot exhaust the topic of context, we cannot ignore it either. What is needed is a more rhetorically aware concept of enunciation (the rhetorical situation of reading). Enunciation may be treated as a formal poetic element embedded in the text, but it needs to be treated more precisely. As we have already noted, the contextualization of production and reception processes belongs to what Ross Winterowd calls "The Rhetorical Transaction of Reading." Every literary "transaction" is, as Aristotle first stated in his *Rhetoric*, the "joint result of three things--the speaker, the subject, and the person addressed" (16). Winterowd explains the transaction in the following manner:

> when we read, we continually try to grasp intention; in so doing, we supply an author. We cannot escape from the rhetorical, pathetic, intentional fallacy.
>
> The meaning is meaningful only in terms of our own beings. We are caught inexorably in the affective fallacy, and there is no escape. Across the cryptic neatness of the page, a writer is contacting a reader. (190-1)

The ubiquitous presence of writers and readers in postmodernist narratives (and theory), along with the increased emphasis on linguistic processes, links written discourse to the pragmatics of face-to-face communication. Bowering notes, for example, that

> One of the delights of the new [postmodern] fiction has been the returning of interest in the verbal, even the vocal forms . . . . Voice, speech, is a means of bonding or asking; it is what connects people with one another & with the world, or reaching from the post-modern world, with the universe. ("Painted Window" 125-26)

Metaphors of conversation replace the conduit metaphors of the realist episteme, generating a new emphasis on dialogue, oral communication, collaboration, and the social function of language in use. In this respect, postmodernism, like New Rhetorical theory, calls forth a new humanism in personal and institutional reading practices, a humanism which celebrates the intricacies of communication between authors and readers, and which seeks to explore the processes of interpretation.

Historically situated authors and readers, we might argue, generate texts, and the "possibility of meaning" does not truly exist "outside specific historical contexts of rhetorical practices" (Mailloux, "Rhetorical" 630). But in our haste to define "specific historical contexts" we should be wary of constructing a model that, as Peter Rabinowitz puts it, "leaves us with reader, text, [author] and context, but no process by which they interact" ("Assuming" 604). Like Hutcheon in her *Poetics of Postmodernism*, we are all too likely to end up acknowledging, on the one hand, that "[d]iscourse is not a stable, continuous entity that can be discussed like a fixed formal text" (185), and then, on the other hand (and in the same paragraph), speaking of postmodernist literature as an autonomous agency "careful to 'situate' itself in its discursive context and then [using] that situating to problematize the very notion of knowledge . . . " (185). If we grant that texts do not situate themselves, then we must look beyond the text to the rhetorical context of reading and writing; and a rhetoric of reading, therefore, must offer both an analysis of reading processes and a way of conceptualizing the rhetorical situations within which such reading processes are socially embedded.

Collaboration and Revolution

Ironically, Hutcheon seems acutely aware of the issues she raises when she treats the subject of enunciation, or as she terms it in *The Canadian Postmodern*, "the complex 'discursive' situation of literature" (16). Hutcheon states clearly that "the 'discourse' of literature consists of a situation wherein the writer, the reader, and the text meet within an entire historical, social, and political, as well as literary, context" (16). And in *A Poetics* she notes a resurgence of interest in the "interactive powers" (77) involved in reading and writing texts. Postmodern art and theory, she speculates, may take us beyond an "alteration of focus from author, to text, to reader"; post-modern art and theory are "perhaps now in a position to show us the next stage" (78). Even more "rhetorically-minded" she repeats a key concept from her introduction and says,

> If art is seen as historical production and as social practice, then the position of the producer cannot be ignored, for there exists a set of social relations between producer (inferred or

> real) and audience that can potentially be revolutionized by a change in the forces of production that might turn the reader into a collaborator instead of a consumer. (80)

Hutcheon's scenario, phrased in the conditional tense, opens up the issue of reading as collaboration, but it seems far too tentative. It is not a matter of "if" or "perhaps": reading and writing cannot be anything but a "social practice"; readers and writers are *already* collaborators in the social production of meaning. Hutcheon can conceive of such co-authoring rather literally in terms of "computerized, participatory 'compunovels'"(77), yet "[n]ormally," she says, "we are merely presented with a self-reflexive exposition of the power relations involved in the interaction of producers and receivers" (77).

As I discussed earlier in relation to her notion of intertextuality, Hutcheon tends to back away from seeing collaboration as more than a hypothetical feature of the reading process. Just when she seems ready to jettison (or at least refashion) her notion of the text *qua* text as the central determiner of interpretation, she hesitates, claiming that "[a]fter all, readers--however free and in final control of the act of reading--are also *always constrained* by what they read, *by the text*" (81; emphasis added). What we need to know is, among other things, "how (and to what extent) does the text 'constrain' its reader?".

Sophisticated notions of collaboration seem all too easily set aside. Lacking a detailed conceptual model of reading, Hutcheon denies herself an epistemological position and thus never commits herself to a view of human knowledge as a cumulative and fundamentally collaborative social activity. Instead she waits for the "revolution" to authorize her otherwise articulate and prescient speculations. Unlike a theorist such as Julia Kristeva in *La Révolution du langage poétique*, Hutcheon does not seem to see postmodernism's challenge to dominant discourses, or its new ways of reading and knowing, as vehicles of radical social change; for Hutcheon, "[p]ostmodernism may well be, as so many want to claim, the expression of a culture in crisis, but it is not in itself any revolutionary breakthrough. It is too contradictory, too wilfully compromised by that which it challenges" (230). She seems to require the purification of postmodern theory as a prerequisite to any genuine "breakthrough." Yet, "paradoxically," she remains unequivocal about what postmodernism teaches:

> [It] teach[es] that, for example, representation cannot be avoided, but it can be studied to show how it legitimates certain kinds of knowledge and, therefore, certain kinds of power. (230)

One wants to respond, "How do you *know*?". But Hutcheon offers nothing more than an indirect, if provocative, glimpse of what a postmodernist epistemology might entail.

In the final chapter of *A Poetics*, she attempts to redefine her position--and even the title of her book:

> Instead of a "poetics," then, perhaps what we have here is a "problematics": a set of problems and basic issues that have been created by the various discourses of postmodernism . . . . (224)

From a rhetorical perspective, such problems (or *topoi*) need not remain the occasion for the continued celebration of epistemological doubt. As Hutcheon herself notes, her "problematics" poses questions that invite answers: "the questions that will make any answering process even possible are at least starting to be asked" (231). The answers, however, do not lie *in* texts, but rather in the kind of movement away from poetics that Hutcheon initiates by invoking the possibility of a dialogue facilitating *both* questions *and* answers. In terms of articulating a theory of reading the postmodern, rhetoric may not have all the answers but it does provide an epistemic view that can help us sort out problem from paradox, mere contradiction from true antinomy.[4]

Inasmuch as I understand Hutcheon's argument, I suspect that our positions are not so very far apart. We both recognize postmodernism's inherent seriousness of purpose, its challenge to realist presuppositions, its notion of knowledge as both provisional and essentially collaborative, and its pedagogical motive, the "radical potential . . . of the postmodern discursive impact on education in an age of increasing self-consciousness" (186). And, quoting Ronald Sukenick, she too emphasizes that the overarching theoretical challenge of postmodernism is to conceptualize and articulate a postmodern epistemology: "We not only need to know things, we also need to know that we know them and how we know them . . ." (Sukenick, qtd. in *A Poetics* 186). Where we differ is in our confidence in the critical conversation's power to take us beyond the endless rehearsal of highly problematic questions. For Hutcheon, postmodernism must remain pre-paradigmatic: subversive and self-consciously marginal. She sees it as deriving its energy by contesting the dominant presuppositions of realism. But as Hutcheon's own critical metanarrative attests, by contesting a dominant discourse we inevitably give definition to an alternate one; and thus, whatever its original subversive intent, postmodernism runs the risk of articulating what might someday become a new orthodoxy. The work of Bowering, Atwood, and Kroetsch (and of Hutcheon) suggests that, at present, postmodernism does not speak with one voice: there are currently many postmodernisms variously committed to subverting conventional ways of knowing art and life. What connects these narratives of postmodernism is their seriousness of purpose; that is, they are manifestly neither apolitical, nor amoral, nor arhetorical.

If a postmodern problematics has given greater urgency to the problem of how we know, then a turn to the rhetorical seems to me an appropriate response. A focus on reading as a heuristic, as a way of knowing, gives the problem particular focus, and it gives us the opportunity to consider the problem as it intersects a variety of interested discourse communities (literary critics, rhetoricians, composition specialists, cognitive psychologists, and so on). We need not theorize away our right to believe or to take a stand (however provisional and self-aware), for, as James Porter maintains, "[e]ven if the writer [and the reader are] locked into a cultural matrix and [are] constrained by the intertext of the discourse community, the writer [and the reader have] freedom within the immediate rhetorical context" (41). After all, although a particular set of generative ideas and metaphors may dominate, discourse communities and the paradigmatic notions that bind them together are not monolithic: some degree of frame conflict seems an inevitable fact of intertextual life. Despite a high degree of consensus on "fundamental" issues, each community holds plural and often contradictory views; and we can move (or slip) between communities, encountering different languages, different assumptions "in the air." The more aware we are, the more free we should be to recontextualize--or "co-contextualize"--and thus to re-see the intellectual problem. The dramatic rise in interest in how we read and know--and the frame conflict such interest exposes--cries out for such a rhetorical recontextualization.

From a conventional rhetorical perspective, then, as Douglas Brent suggests, the "process of reading . . . is not just the interpretation of a text but the interpretation of another person's worldview as presented by a text" (30). From a postmodernist rhetorical perspective, reading is the interpretation of multiple world views collaboratively constructed through the text and the space it brings into focus. A rhetoric of reading the postmodern, in short, seeks to provide a language and a pragmatic frame of reference that will allow the ready conceptualization of the reading process without falling back upon the text-centred assumptions of a realist episteme. An understanding of the process by which writer and reader communicate is not simply a theme to be explored; it is basic to the epistemology underlying a rhetoric of reading and, as such, requires us to reevaluate Hutcheon's refusal (or inability) to include more than a passing consideration of the reader and author as "individual, real, historical agents" (*The Canadian* 61). Unless we acknowledge with Brent that reading involves "making contact with the mind of another human being [the writer]" (29) and that, in turn, a rhetoric of reading "must account for . . . the ultimate goal of updating a belief system or 'worldview'" (29), our notions of reading will remain inexorably tethered to a realist episteme.

I am aware that there is something rather strident-sounding in such a proposition. But the manifesto-like tone of the New Rhetoric seems unavoidable, seeking as it does here to challenge the dominant realist epistemology that frames the subjects of literary inquiry. A rhetoric of reading must find its voice in the ongoing conversation of literary theory: if at first this voice sounds dissonant (or dissident), it is because, like postmodernist writing generally, the rhetorical perspective fosters a self-conscious awareness and questioning of what we have come to regard as reality. A rhetoric of reading does not promise either a value-free or authoritative reading of literature; but, when we turn to the reading of postmodernist texts, it does facilitate a response that is sympathetic to the postmodern concern for process, sensitive to the role of metaphor as a window into the text's social history, and responsibly aware of its own probable epistemological bases.

Begging the Epistemological Question

Rejecting the formalist equation of comprehension with formal structure (an equation that, as Elizabeth Freund notes of New Criticism, simply begs "the epistemological question" (50) of the text's objective status), a rhetoric of reading holds that comprehension occurs when conceptual patterns of knowledge (based on personal experience and cultural conditioning) match, or seem to match, patterns found in the text. Such a definition of comprehension implicitly argues for the importance of social forces--but simply formulating these forces in terms of classical rhetoric will not in itself suffice, for as my discussion of frame conflict in Hutcheon's work suggests, the presuppositions of a realist episteme have a way of diverting the rhetorical conversation. The topic "The Rhetorical Situation," for example, has received considerable attention among rhetoricians--and each reconsideration has had to grapple with the apparent paradoxes and logical dead-ends attributable to recurring realist preconceptions. Gradually, though, over the last two decades or so, contemporary rhetorical theory has moved the notion of context away from its realist foundations.

In his seminal essay on "The Rhetorical Situation," Lloyd F. Bitzer provided the first detailed description of "the nature of these contexts in which speakers or writers create rhetorical discourse" (1). Bitzer argues that "it is the situation which calls the discourse into existence" (2) and then goes on to detail what he calls "the formal aspects of situation" (2): the audience, a point of exigence that requires social response, and those "persons, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action" (8). According to this view, "forms" of discourse can be differentiated on the basis of their rhetorical purposes and their potential readership; Bitzer, for example, concludes that

> [n]either scientific nor poetic discourse requires an audience in the same sense [as rhetorical discourse does]. Indeed, neither requires an audience in order to produce its end; the scientist can produce a discourse expressive or generative of knowledge without engaging another mind, and the poet's creative purpose is accomplished when the work is composed . . . . The scientific audience consists of persons capable of receiving knowledge, and the poetic audience, of persons capable of participating in aesthetic experiences induced by the poetry. But the rhetorical audience must be capable of serving as mediator of the change which the discourse functions to produce. (8)

Poetic discourse is regarded as self-sufficient and abstractable from the world of human mediation. Bitzer illustrates his theory by examining the rhetorical dimension of Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address", a text he regards as clearly "rhetorical":

> Imagine for a moment the Gettysburg Address entirely separated from its situation and existing for us independent of any rhetorical context: as a discourse which does not "fit" any rhetorical situation, it becomes either poetry or declamation, without rhetorical significance. (10)

Intriguingly enough, Bitzer remains untroubled by the apparent fluidity of the text's rhetorical form. He is not arguing that form depends upon context, but rather that context (like form) presents a stable and knowable entity. As an American citizen, and one profoundly affected by the address, Bitzer refuses to deny the address its continuing social relevance; he expands the limiting constraint of the original historical context and claims that in "reality . . . the address continues to have profound rhetorical value precisely because some features of the Gettysburg situation still persist . . . " (10). According to Bitzer, rhetorical value depends upon an utterance's proximity to reality: the more "realistic" the utterance (or the conditions producing the utterance), the more profound and durable its affect upon audiences present and future. Literature, due to its distance from Bitzer's notion of reality, is declared "without rhetorical significance"--though it seems clear enough from the Gettysburg example that rhetorical significance remains very much in the eye of the beholder.

Bitzer ties his concept of the "rhetorical situation" to a firm belief in the recoverability (the intelligibility) of reality. Unlike the underlying epistemology professed by proponents of the New Rhetoric, Bitzer assumes reality to be a shared, objectively verifiable framework--a context that lies unchanging and outside the ebb and flow of rhetorical exchange. Indeed, in a disarmingly bold statement of belief, he suggests that the rhetorical situation may be "read" in much the same way (and with the same sense of confidence) that the New Critics approached literature:

> The exigence and the complex of persons, objects, events and relations which generate rhetorical discourse are located in reality, are objective and publicly observable historic facts in

> the world we experience, are therefore available for scrutiny by an observer or critic who attends to them. (11)

Not all readings of reality agree, of course; but, like the New Critics (whose world view he shares), Bitzer encourages us to have faith and, when faced with contradictory interpretations, simply to read the context more closely.

In "The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation," Richard E. Vatz mounts an articulate attack against the realist epistemology of Bitzer's position. Arguing that meaning does not reside in events, Vatz maintains that no "situation can have a nature independent of the perception of its interpreter or independent of the rhetoric within which he chooses to characterize it" (154). In terms of the present discussion, Vatz puts forward a classic "top-down" view, valorizing freedom of individual creativity and minimizing the relevance of contextual constraints: "meaning," he says, "is not discovered in situations, but *created* by rhetors" (157); and, anticipating Jonathan Culler's well-known dictum that "meaning is context-bound, but context is boundless" (*On Deconstruction* 123), Vatz argues that because "one never runs out of context" (156) it remains too open-ended to offer a distinguishable and thus rhetorically useful frame for meaning.

Scott Consigny, mediating between these two views of the rhetorical situation, notes that they pose an antinomy for a coherent rhetoric and argues that "this apparent antinomy arises from partial views which fail to account for actual rhetorical practice . . ." (176). Consigny's resolution of opposing viewpoints has clear relevance to our discussion of the conflict between realist and postmodernist epistemes, and his notion of rhetorical practice provides a model for implementing a rhetoric of reading. Bitzer, he argues, misjudges the rhetorical situation as being determinate and determining, while Vatz fails to account for how contextual constraints must (to some extent) affect both the production and reception of meaning. "The rhetor," says Consigny, "cannot create exigencies arbitrarily, but must take into account the particularities of each situation in which he actively becomes engaged" (176). Following classical tradition, Consigny describes rhetoric as an art of *topoi* (topics or commonplaces). These *topoi* provide heuristics for exploration and management in indeterminate contexts; employed as rhetorically consistent categories, the *topoi* "structure" disorder "so as to disclose and formulate problems" (178) and bring them to resolution. As a result of this questioning procedure the rhetor "discloses a new 'gestalt' for interpreting and acting in the situation, and thereby offers the audience a new perspective to view the situation" (179).

Consigny's procedure is perhaps best summarized in his narrative description of the rhetor at work. When we look closely at the process described, it becomes clear that the rhetorical program of rational comprehension provides a remarkably useful model for critical reading. In the passage that follows, the words "rhetor" and "reader" may be readily interchanged:

> Because the incoherence of the situation impinges on forms of life acceptable to himself . . . the rhetor must find strategies for shaping the indeterminacies, thereby formulating concrete problems which can be potentially solved. In an incoherent situation the rhetor may encounter speakers who have frozen inquiry in the situation by assuming that determinate problems already exist which demand 'prescribed' responses. The rival formulations are themselves part of the incoherent situation, and the rhetor's task is not to simply adopt an alternative 'position,' but rather to discover what position to adopt by making sense of the situational incoherencies. (177)

The rhetorical reader should not ignore constraints involving particularities of textual features, persons, agencies, and ideologies if his or her disclosures and formulations are to be perceived as intelligible by some other reader (or community of readers). As Brummett argues, the particularities of reality or texts exist, but they are not inherently meaningful:

> The constraints of sensory data are one bond between human beings and one reason why I cannot imagine a tree and have it

> appear. But sense data by themselves are not experience. Experience [or interpretation] is sensation plus *meaning*. Sensation alone is *meaningless*. (28)

It follows therefore that a reader's interpretation, if it is to be meaningful to others, must be inherently rhetorical, involving, that is, an "*advocacy of realities*" (Brummett 31).

In Consigny's terms, effective interpretation of discourse must meet two conditions: the condition of "*integrity*" and the condition of "*receptivity*" (180). "Integrity" describes an internally consistent repertoire of questions that disclose problems and find solutions (i.e. "meaning"). "Receptivity" describes the condition of being true to the particularities of the specific situation, of "allowing the rhetor to become engaged in individual situations without simply inventing and thereby predetermining which problems he is going to find in them" (181). Consigny argues forcefully that such consistency and receptivity are possible; and, with respect to reading theory, and in purely practical terms, it makes sense that some readers will be more consistent and receptive than others. Given the work of thinkers such as Balibar and Macherey, however, we may well be less sanguine than Consigny about the reader's ability to let the "particularities" speak for themselves; although there may be something inherently attractive about such a mediating viewpoint, it is still vulnerable to the criticism that our choice of *topoi*, however pluralistic, remains arbitrary. In addition, our ability to remain "receptive" may be itself an illusion based upon prior experience and often unacknowledged ideological influences; and, by extension, our sense of the situation will never be exact enough to ensure interpretive validity.

But if we cannot ensure validity by seeking the correspondence of interpretation to objective reality, we still have an ethical responsibility to make sure that our readings reflect a correspondence of interpretation to intersubjective reality (Brummett 33). For the "problem" of validity in interpretation only remains an unresolvable one if we hold fast to realist assumptions about the possibility of absolute reliability. Surely there are degrees of reliability that, in practice, are adhered to by the skilled critic and acknowledged by the critic's audience. Indeed, once we acknowledge that reading *is* a process, and that interpretation of complex texts *is* always influenced by rhetorical context, the whole question of absolute reliability seems beside the point. If reading is defined as an heuristic process, then interpretation becomes not a matter of ultimate validity, but a record of how human beings make sense of indeterminate situations. And despite the admittedly perplexing task of theorizing such notions as receptivity and context, Consigny's demand for categorical consistency (combined with a rigorous exploration of underlying assumptions) does suggest a workable rhetorical contribution to both the "art" of interpretative reading and the aim of achieving recognizably "reliable" responses.

A rhetoric of reading, of course, cannot avoid giving context at least provisional definition; like any theorist attempting to understand the process of literary interpretation, the rhetorician faces the problem of formalizing context in a manner congruent with the formal patterns he or she finds significant in the text. While recognizing that contextually-derived categories inevitably frame our perception of meaning, the rhetorician seeks to remain receptive to the particularities of the text under consideration. Under most conditions, we cannot, as they say, "hallucinate" the text. But if we do, and if no one else shares our hallucination, we can be relatively sure that our vision (and any meaning we subsequently deduce) is highly eccentric and socially invalid. Even when we find agreement among readings, however, we cannot claim "validity" in any absolute sense. Brummett explains the rhetorical situation this way:

> The intersubjectivist finds truth in agreement with significant others. Yet agreement does not stand still. It is made and unmade by rhetorical discourse. Others are not mirrors that reflect back to us. They are active agents that *urge* meanings

> upon us. When people seek intersubjective truth by comparing their meanings they are involved in rhetoric . . . . [A] world view in which truth is agreement *must* have rhetoric at its heart, for agreement is gained in no other way. (35)

Reading thus becomes a conversation, an interactive process of seeking consistency between socially-constructed contextual categories and textual patterns.

Conventionally, it is at this point that the interactive compromise between the top-down and bottom-up perspectives on reading begins to break down. Steven Mailloux, for example, insists that there is no middle way: he decries the whole enterprise of attempting to formalize context in a manner useful to hermeneutic theory:

> Any account that uses "context" to contrain interpretation . . . has only two options: either it must simply name "context," "situation," or "circumstances" as a constraint and not elaborate any further, or it must carry out an infinite history of all aspects of context and their interrelations . . . . In other words, interpretive theories of context must either never begin the process of specification or never end it. ("Rhetorical" 626)

For Mailloux, the solution to the question of context and what he terms "the realist/idealist [bottom-up and top-down]"[5] debate in hermeneutics is to avoid such problems altogether--"to stop doing Theory" (628). Following Richard Rorty and his attack on epistemology in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Mailloux proffers an "anti-Theory theory," a "rhetorical hermeneutics" (629) which suspends epistemological questions and "continues theorizing about interpretation only therapeutically, exposing the problems with foundationalism and explaining the attraction of realist and idealist positions" (631). The problem, of course, is that Mailloux himself needs a context in which his "anti-theory theory" makes sense. As Graeme Nicholson says of Rorty, he

> is right to point out that the old idea of providing philosophical 'foundations' was often wedded to inadequate ideas about knowledge, but he does not develop the point that interpretation may have 'foundations' itself . . . . Being aware

> of the need to interpret does not free us from epistemology, it only relocates the epistemological question. (*Seeing* 23-24)

Since epistemology seems overly problematic for Mailloux, he shifts his attention to "ideologies," which become "defining positions within the cultural conversation" (*Rhetorical* 60). Why the particulars of ideology should be any more available than those of epistemology Mailloux never explains. His point seems to be that a preoccupation with epistemology has tended to make critics underestimate the significance of ideologies present within specific historical contexts. He proposes a new emphasis by "[c]alling for an end to epistemology" (144); but, curiously, he does not wish the end to epistemology to mean that "references to . . . interpretive frameworks are ruled out of bounds" (146). Rather, he sees readings as separable from any underlying epistemological theories, which, he argues, "place . . . [readings] into the ahistorical space in which general accounts of reading attempt to dwell" (146). Mailloux's position may be pragmatic, and it may tell us about "readings," but it has little to say about reading *processes*. The hermeneutics fulfills, instead, a primarily descriptive role, pointing out logical inconsistencies in other contemporary hermeneutic theories and constructing "histories of how particular theoretical and critical discourses have evolved" (631).

As the last chapter's discussion of open and closed forms (and the following chapter's discussion of critical responses to prairie fiction) might suggest, my own critical practice takes a very similar rhetorical direction to that of Mailloux. However, my experience as both a teacher and a reader of literature tells me that the job (and the pleasure) of the critic/theorist goes beyond the purely descriptive role of locating prior readings within a matrix of ideological (that is, social, political, institutional, and historical) circumstances. We need such histories of reading, but a rhetoric of reading postmodernist discourse cannot long defer the kinds of questions that Mailloux wishes to avoid (or, at least, keep at arm's length). "In theory" it may be possible for Mailloux to maintain (as he does in his recent book-length elaboration of his position) that we can "dispense with many pseudo problems troubling contemporary theories of reading--for example, the endless questions about whether texts or readers determine meaning" (*Rhetorical* 145); and while it may be possible to theorize rhetorical maneuvers that "have nothing to do with epistemological theories" (146), such a rhetorical hermeneutics seems a poor response to a postmodernist ethos enthralled by questions of interpretive freedom and changing epistemological positions.

One of the most engaging critiques of critical projects such as Mailloux's belongs to Michèle Barrett in her article "Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender" (published coincidently in the same year as Mailloux's "Rhetorical Hermeneutics"). Speaking from a feminist perspective, Barrett argues that "a position resting on a rejection of epistemological theories must inevitably reject any elements of determination in its approach to ideology" (67). Shifting the discussion of ideology's role in reading may seem to mark, as Barrett ironically terms it, "the final transcendence of the epistemological problematic of 'ideology'"(68), but such a manoeuvre only camouflages yet another epistemological stance arguing for the relative autonomy of ideology: Mailloux and other like-minded critics have simply "shifted the discourse of ideology onto the terrain of the discourse of discourse and while in their terms this may be as real an advance as any other, to the critic of discursive imperialism it may seem a nominal rather than a conceptual gain" (68).

Our perception of meaning as something "discovered," "socially constructed," or variously "deferred" and made "problematic" through deconstruction has consequences for interpretation. And while we must assume that these theories of knowledge are shaped by ideology--by the social, economic, and political forces of production--we should not adopt the anti-rhetorical notion that ideology is somehow available as an autonomous object of interpretation. To view rhetoric and reading as epistemic--as a process of knowing and believing--does not mean that we ignore historical forces; on the contrary, an epistemic focus consistently implicates questions about the historical context of reception. It does mean, however, as Nicholson argues, that "the concept 'history' . . . is not an object of our representation, but a force within ourselves, not a backdrop against which we envisage the text or document we are interpreting, but an a priori of our own thought and research" (*Seeing* 194). What is true for history is true for texts as well. To explore questions of process we must come to terms with how epistemology helps constitute and shape the prior knowledge we bring to texts. Our interpretations of ideology--the stories we tell about the historical circumstances of production (and reception)--help explain how particular readings are shaped, but they are no substitute for a theory of reading. As I suggested (with Flower) in chapter 1, a rhetoric of reading needs a socio-cognitive balance: we need cognitive theories of process *and* social narratives of context. Epistemology cannot be discarded, and, as a principal theme of postmodern narratives, it cannot be ignored. The epistemological questions of reading are interconnected with those of perception, of whose story (if any) we believe, of how we understand texts, our environment, and ourselves; and, appropriately, these are the questions that show up as the generative themes (the rhetorical *topoi*) of Bowering, Atwood, and Kroetsch.

All reading, even that based upon a rhetorical hermeneutics, devolves upon a process of interpretation that is *both* epistemologically based and socially constrained. But, as the history of New Critical practice attests, the process of interpretation does not depend upon awareness of these cognitive and contextual forces. Interpretation will go on, with or without the public working out of complex hermeneutic theories. My point is that we need not recoil from imperfect accounts of how context constrains interpretation, or of how cognition mediates the text and the world, for logically, and in full accord with a rhetorical conception of reading, our definition of context and cognition must always remain not a formal fact, but a working hypothesis, a global interpretation that, implicitly or explicitly, shapes the more localized interpretations we bring to texts. Mailloux's well-taken criticism--that a complete understanding of how context constrains interpretation presents a methodological (and a logical) impossibility--should not keep us from recognizing that context *does* constrain interpretation and that an enhanced recognition of how contextual forces and cognitive processes interact will produce more self-critical, more rhetorically aware readings. Only if we wish to constrain interpretation to a single, eternally true reading should the infinite regress of contexts inhibit our pursuit of progressively more meaningful interpretations. A more rhetorically sound procedure would be to disclose issues and bring them to resolution by publicly placing them within provisional topological contexts and skillfully testing those contexts for epistemological consistency. The challenge for a rhetoric of reading, especially a rhetoric of reading postmodernist writing, is not to avoid theory (as Mailloux suggests), but to make theory an integral element of critical practice.

Rhetorical Points of Departure

In the first part of this thesis I have attempted to sort out those major "rival formulations" that contribute toward the incoherency of situation. In order to make sense of the situational incoherencies, an obligation that, as Consigny notes, remains primary in rhetorical practice, I have found it necessary to invoke rival assumptions and test them for consistency against the set of problems (or *topoi*) that a rhetoric of reading postmodernist discourse should address: questions about context's role in constraining meaning; about the nature of reality and the reader's position inside or outside the text; about the notions of bottom-up or top-down construction of meaning; about the rhetorical distance between self and other; about closed and open forms; about the whole question of product versus process; and about the relationship between reading and knowing. Implicit throughout this discussion is the contention that a poetics of postmodernism remains premature: until its rhetorical situation can be accounted for, such a poetics must satisfy itself with the taxonomy of arbitrary categories, and with the cold comfort of paradox, contradiction, and mystification. Simply rehearsing the logic of postmodernism in the language of postmodernism can only lead to the construction of logically, socially, and psycholinguistically impossible models of reading--models that, of necessity, either eschew discussion of processes, or treat coherence as the suspect product of an exclusively realist epistemology. Reading "against the grain," or reading as a "resisting" reader does not mean (as one recent critic has suggested) that we should "stop reading for coherence" and begin "to take our critical cues from the literatures before us, to read for contradiction" (Murray "Reading" 78); it does mean, however, that readers (especially readers of postmodernism) need to consider the rhetorical dimensions of their own reading processes as a necessary complement to traditional critical interpretation.

Given the profound divisions amongst theorists concerned with reading and its contexts, one can hardly speak of "the" rhetoric of reading (much less "the process" of reading). We can, however, construct "a" rhetoric of reading that, while neither inclusive nor definitive, constitutes a consistent interpretive response to the reader's rhetorical situation. A rhetoric of reading does not provide a clear path to truth, but it does explain the possibility of meaning. The process of category formation (or context building), a process I offer as central to reading, requires that we impose coherence upon an otherwise incoherent world. To restate my argument in these new terms, then, the rhetoric of reading examined here does not pretend to account for all the ways in which a text may be read; I do argue, though, that the kinds of questions addressed by this rhetoric are those provoked by a postmodernist critical and creative ethos, and that failure to attend closely to questions of reading theory and process constitutes a theoretically naive response to the challenge of reading postmodernist narratives. Our belief in the autonomy of the text, our interpretations of texts, our sense of the relative power between text and reader, and even our notions of how reading processes operate are based upon epistemological assumptions (about the nature of reality and the way in which we comprehend that reality). Ways of conceptualizing readers and reading reflect ways of conceptualizing the world. Once again, coherence in reading depends upon the consistency (and ingenuity) with which we impose our theory of knowledge upon any particular text. Postmodernist reading and epistemology offer an alternative to traditional patterns of response, challenging readers to make public and operative their private theory of how the world works, exposing the gap between realist working assumptions and the postmodernist alternatives. Like Rennie in Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm*, the reader is encouraged to feel "that a large gap [has] appeared in what she'd been used to thinking of as reality" (210).

Without a consistent world view about the purpose and nature of texts and reading, interpretation (that is, a meaningful understanding) would be impossible. As Smith says, "All of the order and complexity that I perceive in the world around me must reflect an order and complexity in my own mind. Anything I cannot relate to the theory of the world in my head will not make sense to me. I shall be bewildered" (55). Postmodernism presents us with a potentially bewildering reading experience: if we continue to interpret postmodernist discourse in terms of a conventional, "realist" theory of the world, we are likely to be continually disappointed by postmodernism's apparent lack of unity, characterization, or seriousness of purpose. However, as our collective sense of reality begins to accommodate a more rhetorical perspective, as we come to terms with the "large gap" in the realist episteme, postmodernism begins to make more and more sense. The epistemological shift is a matter of rhetorical suasion: the reader's changing shape of belief.

No single theory, of course, can offer us principles that are eternally true for all situations; but if we are willing to adopt a rhetorical perspective--if we restrict our focus to a constellation of topoi relevant to a specific situation--we can establish a rhetorical position that has the advantage of treating reading as a consistent and understandable process. The "validity" of such a rhetoric of reading depends upon its ability to interpret the particular alignment of epistemologies (informing writers, readers, and texts) that, when and where they intersect, help constitute literary meaning. We should not conclude, however, that rhetorical inquiry alone can explain even this restricted focus thoroughly. For no matter how scrupulous our analysis, we need to remain aware that our own epistemological base is always already contaminated by culturally-conditioned presuppositions. Thus in the final analysis, a rhetoric of reading must attempt to foreground a metacritical (if imperfect) awareness of its own limitations: literary and rhetorical theory cannot tell us the whole story.

Such an admission need not dissuade us from theoretical inquiry; it simply acknowledges that there are some questions best explored in combination with other forms of discourse. The answer to the question "How do we read?" cannot be reduced to a literal summary of psycholinguistic processes and possible contexts: while reflection on these matters has produced (and no doubt will continue to produce) valuable insights into the way we construct and come to know reality, there are, as Wayne Booth notes, many kinds of questions "that can only be answered with a story" (*Modern Dogma* 186). As I argued in chapter 1, the question of how we read requires, at least in part, a narrative response. While Booth maintains that narrative can provide a full answer to many questions, I would argue that the answer to the question "How do we read?" is located at the intersection between theory and narrative, a space (a *topos*) best explored by a rhetoric of reading postmodernist fiction.

I noted earlier that works such as *Burning Water* and *Caprice, The Handmaid's Tale*, and *What the Crow Said* self-consciously conflate theory and narrative practice; now I think it fair to say that the production and reception of such works give increased attention to narrative's suasory potential.[6] Let me reiterate that, in terms of a rhetoric of reading, theory and narrative constitute related modes of inquiry, and only a synthesis of the two can provide a truly satisfying account of the process of reading postmodernist literature.

The following argument, then, will continue to develop a rhetoric in conversation with other voices seeking to define a theory of reading postmodernist discourse. My objective throughout will be to show how the principles offered by the New Rhetoric provide both a consistent critical approach and a valuable critical vocabulary. Chapter 3 explores the dialectical relationship between two opposing world views (the realist episteme versus the postmodernist episteme) and presents a more detailed account of the prevailing postmodernist ethos that motivates the writing and reading of many contemporary Canadian narratives. And the chapters that follow--focusing as they do on specific narrative responses to the question "How do we Read?"--are offered as both a critical response and an exploration of the crucial rhetorical intersection between literary theory and narrative practice.

NOTES

[1] Lakoff and Johnson offer a detailed discussion of the conversation metaphor in *Metaphors We Live By*. For a recent review and critique of the conversation metaphor, see Anthony Paré's "Ushering 'Audience' Out: From Oration to Conversation."

[2] The literature on epistemic rhetoric began with Robert L. Scott's article in 1967, "On Viewing Rhetoric As Epistemic." Scott's position, since elaborated by Barry Brummett, Walter Carleton, and others, holds that rhetoric is central to the creation of all knowledge--that we interpret by attributing meaning to sensory data, and that sensory data are meaningless until accepted as meaningful by some form of consensus within a community. In his review of the literature on epistemic rhetoric, Jeffery Bineham calls this view the "consensus theory of epistemic rhetoric" and notes that "[r]eality, for consensus theorists, is created by the same rhetorical processes through which it is known" ("Cartesian Anxiety" 53), that is, through discourse.

[3] The most recent call for a rhetoric of reading comes from Robert Scholes in *Protocols of Reading*. Scholes writes that "a rhetoric of reading will do better to take its departure from Aristotle than from the modernist heirs of Romanticism" (107). "Indeed," he adds,

> I will, in a properly postmodern manner, go beyond Aristotle and assert that no text is ever purely reasonable, just as I have gone beyond or against the Romantics in asserting that no text is ever purely aesthetic. We are all inside rhetoric. It is the textual medium in which we live. (107)

[4] In *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays*, W. V. Quine distinguishes among three kinds of paradox: "veridical, or truth-telling paradoxes"; "falsidical" paradoxes, which take a logical fallacy to an absurd conclusion; and "antinomies, "which produce "self contradiction by accepted ways of reasoning" (7). The veridical reveals a strange truth, the falsidical is often based upon a seductive but faulty premise, and the antinomy causes a revision in accepted ways of reasoning. Quine explains it this way:

> A veridical paradox packs a surprise, but the surprise quickly dissipates itself as we ponder the proof. A falsidical paradox packs a surprise, but it is seen as a false alarm when we solve the underlying fallacy. An antinomy, however, packs a surprise that can be accommodated by nothing less than a repudiation of part of our conceptual heritage. (11)

All paradoxes are clearly not created equal, and we need to determine whether postmodernism presents simply a logical (or illogical) surprise, or "a repudiation of part of our conceptual heritage."

[5] Mailloux does not cite the works of Smith, Goodman, LaBerge and Samuels, etc., explicitly, but the opposition of realist and idealist perspectives nonetheless constitutes a rehearsal of the bottom-up/top-down debate discussed in chapter 1.

[6] Not only does reading necessitate an "advocacy of realities" as we construct meaning within social discourse, but all literature can be thought of as "sermonic" (Weaver, *Language is Sermonic*) or "proverbial" (Burke, *The Philosophy*). Here's Burke on the subject:

> Could the most complex and sophisticated works of art legitimately be considered somewhat as "proverbs writ large"? . . . [T]he kind of observation from this perspective should apply beyond literature to life in general (thus helping to take literature out of its separate bin and give it a place in a general "sociological" picture).
>
> The point of view might be phrased this way: Proverbs are *strategies* for dealing with *situations*. In so far as situations are typical and recurrent in a given social structure, people develop names for them and strategies for handling them. Another name for strategies might be *attitudes*. (*The Philosophy* 256)

CHAPTER THREE

Reading and Realism: a Story of Reader Response[1]

If we are to understand what it is to read "post-realistically," we need to explore something of the history of realism and realist reading practices in Canada. In fact, when we look closely at several examples of celebrated realist texts (and the responses they have received), we find that their formal characteristics are, in practice, inextricably interconnected with the rhetorical context of their reading. As a prelude, then, to a more detailed examination of postmodernist reading conventions (and reading, in general) let us look first at an illustration of readers' power to define form according to the principles of "realism."

Nearly fifty years ago, reading researchers such as Douglas Waples, Bernard Berelson, and Franklyn Bradshaw were arguing that readers'

> predispositions [their prior knowledge, personalities, and habitual attitudes shaped by group associations] represent the least understood and probably the most important . . . [factor] to which . . . we ascribe the social effects of reading. Closer attention to such group predispositions as can more safely be inferred from obtainable evidence will greatly refine the present knowledge of reading effects. (100)

As we've already discussed, only recently has the notion of "group predispositions" or "interpretive communities" gained great currency in the marketplace of reading theory and literary criticism. The theoretical notion of an interpretive community is clearly indebted to early sociological investigations; similarly, more recent literary speculations have much in common with Kuhn's discussion of paradigms (that "facts" in science depend upon the frame of reference the observer imposes upon the phenomena being observed), Gestalt psychology, and the complementary notion of schema theory--introduced into the literature by F.C. Bartlett (in 1932) and developed in terms of reading theory by, among others, David Rumelhart, Kenneth Goodman, and Frank Smith. Literary theories put forward by Stanley Fish, David Bleich, Walter Michaels, and Jonathan Culler all insist, to varying degrees, that any individual critic's view of a particular literary text is likely to be affected by certain assumptions (schemata) shared by the community of scholars to which the critic belongs. Literary interpretation, so the argument goes, is not a matter of individual perception alone; every interpretation is both a process of individual discovery and a product of shared interpretive strategies.

The problem, though, in applying the notion of paradigms, schemata, or group predispositions to literary studies is that, as already noted in chapter 1, most critical communities are far from homogeneous. In *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* Robert Holub points out,

> Literary communities--if we deign to extend this term to the literary sphere--are more often embroiled in "paradigm" controversies of a more complex nature [than we would find among the scientific community]. (*Reception* 5)

Holub is certainly right in the sense that it is difficult to speak of a period of "normal" scholarship in the humanities; the competing mix of critical approaches, from New Criticism to post-structuralist criticism, tends to present at first glance a rather fragmented paradigm. But in the same discussion Holub does allow the existence of "quasi-independent communities, each with its own paradigm" (6). We should not, of course, equate the term paradigm with some univocal, pure category (whatever that might be): even at the moment of consensus we find the presence of differing (competing) viewpoints. Some degree of frame conflict seems inevitable--no matter how persuasive the paradigm. But while it may be overly ambitious to speak confidently of paradigms and paradigm-shifting in the context of literary criticism as a whole, identifying and examining the reading processes of "quasi-independent" critical communities seems a logical response to the challenge presented by Waples long ago; such a focus certainly provides a useful point of departure for our understanding of how reader response changes when we contrast realist and postmodernist views of literature and reality.

The question I shall explore, then, is whether conventions of reading are determined by new forms, or whether new forms are determined by changing conventions of reading. Hutcheon's answer, remember, is that the

> course of literary history is being altered, and, as always, it is being altered by the texts, not the critics. In fact, [the] new narcissistic fiction is allowing (is forcing?) a re-evaluation of the novels of the past, thanks to its challenging of the inadequate, reified critical notion of 'realism' based on a narrow product mimesis alone. (*Narcissistic* 39)

But must the power of the reader remain dependent upon the development of new forms? Surely the fact that novels of the past can be re-evaluated and re-interpreted suggests that reading conventions are not simply reactions to form, but are a set of preconceptions brought to form by a community of readers.

Canadian criticism, in particular that branch which focuses on prairie fiction, offers an intriguing case study of just such an interpretive community at work. Canadian literary criticism has long spoken if not with one voice then at least with a significant and widely shared critical intent: to further the aims of cultural nationalism by establishing a critical narrative that privileges those aspects of Canadian literature--the lonely prairie landscape, the implacable brooding force of Nature, the sense of human isolation--that are historically associated with the early Canadian pioneer experience and the process of nation-building. Not all readers agree--especially those who self-consciously disassociate themselves from the institutionalized teaching of "Canlit." Paul Stuewe, for example, argues in *Clearing the Ground* against distortions that "can easily occur as a direct consequence of the nature of thematic criticism" (18). He does not deny the significance of the "garrison mentality" as a generative metaphor for criticism, though. He simply laments the pervasiveness of its influence.[2] My intent here is not to validate (or invalidate) a particular critical approach, but to suggest that, once accepted, the nationalist narrative assumes paradigmatic status for those who adhere to its presuppositions: it establishes a closed frame of reference marked by the kind of remarkable critical consensus that Hutcheon, Docherty, and Eco reserve for "open" texts.

Such a state of critical concord has not gone unnoticed. In his retrospective look at the teaching of Canadian literature, John Harker explains that

> Canadians lost sight of the evolutionary nature of cultural development and became preoccupied with establishing the legitimacy of their own nation and its literature as immutable truths . . . . [W]e had a template which we could impose over our national experience as reflected in our literature. ("Teaching" 24)

And, as Leon Surette notes,

> a central preoccupation of Canadian literary criticism has been the discovery and identification of its subject of study . . . with a view to discovering the peculiar or identifying characteristics of [Canada's] collective expression or discourse. (45)

This collective preoccupation is best exemplified by what Northrop Frye has called the "garrison mentality"--the critical narrative's controlling metaphor for the Canadian national imagination fixated on, yet cowering from, the imposing natural wilderness. However, as I intend to show, the image of the imagination held captive does not so much describe Canadian prairie fiction as it prescribes critical practice and reader response to "realist" fiction.

The Evolving Critical Narrative

As I have indicated, a critical commonplace regards Canadian literature (especially prairie literature) as an imaginative reflection of a rather nervous preoccupation with environment. Nancy Fraser has documented how this human/landscape confrontation has long been regarded as the thematic touchstone of Canadian realism. Literary critics of the early twenties--J.D. Logan and Donald G. French, Archibald MacMechan, Marcus Adeney, Lionel Stevenson, George Bugnet--tend to favor a "realistic treatment of the environment" (Fraser, "Development" 293), and to see people's struggle with the land as the crucial issue for prose writers of the period. Stevenson's 1924 appraisal of Canadian literature has a very contemporary ring: citing the work of French philosopher and historian H.A. Taine, Stevenson maintains that

> Without going into all Taine's analysis of the effects of climate, scenery and living conditions on literature, one may assume that while a race is developing its particular national culture and temper of mind these factors are of first importance. The inhabitants of Canada brought in their whole system of civilization ready-made. They have erected a barrier against the natural influences of the country; but those with the poetic gift of seeing and feeling cannot be quite oblivious to Canada's immensity and power. (36)

The formula is clear: a true "Canadian" literature offers direct "seeing" and immediacy of expression. Since Frye's more recent reformulation, critical inquiry, true to its inherited nationalist assumptions, has given even greater attention to the importance of Canadian landscape.

The seventies saw a bumper crop of prairie-based elaborations on this inherited "garrison" metaphor. Edward McCourt's revised edition of *The Canadian West in Fiction* (1970), William New's *Articulating West* (1972), Donald Stephens' *Writers of the Prairies* (1973), Laurence Ricou's *Vertical Man/Horizontal World* (1973), and Dick Harrison's

Unnamed Country (1977) all focus on the Canadian setting and each in its own way asks how the vast, level space enters into "the psychology and literature of our prairie west" (Ricou 2). (Other major works of the same period, D.G. Jones' *Butterfly on Rock* (1970), Margaret Atwood's *Survival* (1972), John Moss' *Patterns of Isolation* (1974), and Margaret Northey's *The Haunted Wilderness* (1976), explore variants of the same theme.) The Canadian prairie is seen as an empty, silent, frightening setting; and prairie fiction of the twenties and thirties is described as a record of human shock at the emptiness of the land, a "record of man conquering his geographical solitude, and, by extension, his other solitudes . . . (Ricou 6).

By 1974, Don Gutteridge, a Canadian educator and critic, could celebrate the solidification of the critical paradigm:

> after a long, slow start, Canadian criticism is now providing teachers with frameworks, overviews, and generative statements which are vital to any organized teaching of Canadian literature. ("Teaching" 136)

And four years later, in a curriculum guide for elementary and high schools, Gutteridge applies the "framework" and outlines what must be considered a typical "unit" in Canadian Literature:

> *Thematic Unit: The Land*
> *Subtheme: Mountain and Plain*
> (other subthemes for future study or supplementary work might include the North, the pioneer experience, country and city, attitudes to Nature)
>
> *Theme Expansion:*
> **mountain*: a challenge, a barrier, source of isolation or protection, brooding symbol of Nature or geological time
> **plain*: the prairie as source of isolation, loneliness, registrar of seasons; symbol of wilderness and challenge; the open farmland and borderland rural areas as pioneer landscape and pastoral retreat; danger, work and isolation; the role of open space in creating a feeling of isolation, alienation, rootlessness and family dependency . . . . (*The Country* 31)

Similarly, a recent classroom fact sheet, part of the *Can Lit Odyssey* series produced for use in high schools and community colleges, advises students as follows:

> Picture someone standing straight on land that stretches clear to the horizon and you have the basic symbol of prairie literature: the confrontation between the human and the land. (Coady, 1)

Such reductive, formulaic guides are symptomatic of an interpretive community looking for narrative coherence in literary history. The whole enterprise is, explicitly or implicitly, nationalistic--a partisan attempt to determine through numerous socio-political narratives the family history of Canadian letters. Naturally enough, those texts which have received the most attention--*Settlers of the Marsh, Wild Geese, As For Me And My House*--are said to conform to the nationalistic, "garrison" view.

The modern critical narrative that has coalesced around Frye's metaphor, then, is a powerful one. It has served as a basis for some remarkable critical insights; but as I have indicated, the Frygian view of Canada as a cultural garrison implies a shared reading schema that itself deserves investigation.

Reading Two Key Texts

Margaret Ostenso's *Wild Geese* and Frederick Philip Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh*, two of the key, "canonized" texts in the evolving narrative of prairie fiction as the product of a garrison culture, have long been considered pivotal in the evolution of the Canadian novel from romance to realism (the latter a form well-suited to present the elemental struggle of man and landscape). Both novels have been described as works of "uncompromising realism" (Saunders, xiii)--"essentially realistic" because of "the description of the environment they contain and the effect of that environment on the characters" (Fraser, 296). As Dick Harrison suggests, "we generally accept the development of prairie realism with its preference for the stark and threatening aspect of the plains as the culmination of prairie fiction" (x-xi). On this point there seems little contemporary debate.

But there are problems here: *Settlers'* protagonist, Niels, shows a remarkable innocence that seems more the stuff of romance than realism; and *Settlers'* happy ending, with the unlikely romantic union between Niels and Ellen, seems likewise improbable. In *Wild Geese*, the description of Caleb (the novel's antagonist) as a brooding, menacing force seems better suited to melodrama than to realism. Perhaps more troubling still, neither Grove nor Ostenso can be considered true products of the Canadian soil: Grove (born Felix Paul Greve in 1879) was a German writer and translator before he moved to Canada in 1909; Ostenso studied creative writing in the United States and spent only a short period living on the Canadian prairies. Indeed, one recent critic has mused that, "[i]n a sense, Martha Ostenso is not a Canadian writer at all" (Atherton 57). Yet the Canadian critical narrative continues to praise both writers as the primary exponents of early "Canadian" realism.

Any reading that sees the novels as a realistic extension of man's confrontation with a barren landscape must overlook (sometimes rather awkwardly) those passages that, if emphasized, threaten the integrity of the garrison mentality thesis. Laurence Ricou's treatment of *Wild Geese* provides a useful illustration.

As the Canadian novel grows more realistic, says Ricou, the image of man as a "vertical intrusion in a horizontal world [becomes] primary" (18). Ricou argues that "it is by variations on this basic image that the writer can explore his characters and the impact which a distinctive terrain makes upon them" (18). When he focuses on *Wild Geese*, Ricou carefully notes those passages which conform to his geometric metaphor: the "level monotony" (Ostenso 104) of Ostenso's prairie, the vertical figure of Caleb looking out over his domain, and the "solitary figure of a man" on a prairie, "spare as an empty platter" (Ostenso 112). And, echoing the convenient discourse on the "spareness of both physical and spiritual life" (Ostenso 77) offered by Mark Jordan in chapter 5 of *Wild Geese*, Ricou concludes that "in the absence of external reassurance . . . [one] must search the depths of his own being" (80). But Mark Jordan's observation is romantic--a fitting, if somewhat erudite, viewpoint for a lonely man in serious conversation with the girl he loves. Ricou's critical appropriation, however, like his focus on the conveniently appropriate "geometrical" images present in the novel, overlooks a great deal.

The "level monotony" of the prairie landscape is an outsider's view: the words are those of a school teacher, Lind Archer. They occur in chapter 8, at a point where the "unbroken monotony" of farm life offers the teacher, "free of her school duties for two weeks in the month of July" (103), little distraction. Similarly, the view of the prairie "spare as an empty platter" reflects Judith's (the heroine's) growing perception of herself as an outsider trapped in a world of monotonous routine. These are the views of characters who are (or who have become), in Ostenso's words, "preposterously ill-fitted to [their] environment" (16).

At other points in the novel the scenery seems considerably more attractive--and at odds with Ricou's view of the landscape as monotonous, barren, and exhausted. In spring "the little buds [are] opening stickily on the elms, and tinging their boughs with purple and brown" (25); cottonwoods are "festooned with ragged catkins" (25); Lind's country walks are punctuated by romantic natural discourse as catbirds return her whistle "on the identical note" (50); night opens for Lind and Mark "like a tender, gloomed flower" (108), and the "moonlight [seems] to form a globe over them, locking out every alien sound" (108). The landscape is "languid and sonorous with the drone of bees over tawny meadows" (170), and where, as the seasons change, butterflies dance "as thoughtlessly as ever over the pink remnant of the last wild rose" (170). The landscape is neither particularly level nor monotonous, and the geometric imperative cited by Ricou does not inform our overall view of Ostenso's prairie landscape. If anything, the landscape presented is benign and nurturing: a place for nature walks, lovers' meetings, and personal reflection.

Throughout *Wild Geese*, descriptions of (and reflections upon) landscape echo the multiple perspectives and moods of the characters represented. Landscape is presented as an extension of inner tension and consciousness. When, for example, near the novel's conclusion, Lind Archer walks to the top of the north ridge and looks down at the "serene world lying below" (195); and when she remarks that it is "hard to imagine that people are concerned with anything ignoble when you look out on a world like this, isn't it" (195), we are encouraged to remember Caleb, the rather melodramatic despot, filled with avarice and a "glow of satisfaction as he stood there on [a similar] ridge" (19) peering out over his land. As the contrast between Lind's view and Caleb's view makes clear, the land is not the villain here; and Ricou's contention that the overwhelming sense of loneliness springs, in large measure, from man's confrontation with a barren, empty land seems to contradict many descriptions of landscape found in the text.

The critic's insightful, unquestionably lucid reading, focusing as it does on the presence of vertical and horizontal images, yields only a partial view of the novel's landscape. As I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, my point here is not to question a critical reading, nor a critical method--whatever its limitations, Ricou's treatment of *Wild Geese* remains a sensitive and valuable commentary. The point is that Ricou's reading valorizes precisely those elements of the text that support the contemporary critical paradigm of response to prairie fiction. Form remains subordinate to the reading conventions that Ricou shares with similar-minded critics.

Maintaining the Paradigm

To maintain the paradigm, the critical community must conflate notions of reality and realism: the faithful representation of geographic realities (and the description of man's reaction to those realities) must be regarded as the key distinguishing feature of prairie realism. As Stephens notes in his "Introduction" to *Writers of the Prairies*, "the pure physicality of the landscape" (1) imposes itself on the consciousness of writers and critics alike. Each of the three extended narratives on prairie fiction--by McCourt, Ricou, and Harrison--begins with an elaborate review of observations by geographers and early explorers. Altitude, topography, climate, vegetation, precipitation--all are carefully acknowledged and thus offer a "realistic" referential framework within which prairie fiction may be discussed. William New's comments are typical: "As Canadian writers have attempted to identify their culture by solving what Northrop Frye has called the problem of locating 'where *here* is,' they have inevitably responded to the physical landscape" (xi-xii). Only Ricou offers a cautionary note: "setting, in itself," says Ricou, "does not fundamentally alter the theme of fiction" (xi). Yet, in order to pursue his thesis, the critic must proceed as though the "landscape, and man's reaction to it, is the concrete situation with which the prairie artist initiates his re-creation of the human experience" (xi).

In essence, the critics assume a behaviourist stance. The assumption here, despite Ricou's assertion to the contrary, is that the "combination of landscape and climatic environment [in the real world] determines the whole range of themes in the literature of the prairies" (Stephens 2). And because the muse (the geography) is real, the resulting literary representation must be realistic and must be rooted in the soil. The critical context (and the reading conventions it produces), not the text itself, insists that *Wild Geese* be read as a work of realism.

Of Paradigm Shifts and New Perspectives

The basis of the paradigm, that prairie fiction is the product of environmental conditioning, can only be maintained by focusing exclusively on a limited selection of texts--and on a limited selection of passages from those texts. I do not wish to suggest that critics deliberately overlook aspects of the text that might contradict their readings; on the contrary, as I have already argued at some length, mature reading requires selectivity based on presupposition as a fundamental condition for understanding and interpretation. Of course, not all readers share the same literary assumptions. Not surprisingly, a few voices have argued that, in general, the literary commentary on prairie fiction misrepresents the works. Barry Cameron and Michael Dixon, for example, in an openly polemical attempt to dismantle the paradigm, claim that the current collective critical reading is hopelessly flawed. Ironically enough, the established narrative of realist response is criticized for not adhering to a more doctrinaire realist model of reading. Formalism, fixed attention to the words on the page, is offered as an anodyne to wrong-headed or incomplete interpretations. "To focus on form," say Cameron and Dixon, "is to place works of Canadian literature in their most immediate and proper context, the autonomous world of literature" (142). The sentiment is a familiar one, but I would argue (from a rhetorical perspective) that it fails to acknowledge that literature's supposed autonomy is always subject to the exigencies of critical interpretation. Formalism alone cannot insulate literature from the social world of readers.

Overt attacks on the "garrison" theme are subtly complemented by less polemical rhetorical strategies when critics search for new, meaningful, critical contexts. In "A Northern Modernism, 1920-32: Canadian Painting and Literature," for example, Sherrill Grace suggests that we situate our discussion of early Canadian literature within the context of the prevailing Northern and modernist aesthetic of the twenties, and thus lays the groundwork for a discussion of prairie fiction in terms of modernist space (space that is primarily psychological, not physical). In a more specific treatment of a single text, Camille La Bossière strikes a similar chord when he argues that traditional attempts to confine *Settlers of the Marsh* to the "realistic" mode ignore the psychological and linguistic dimensions of Grove's artistic vision. La Bossière places *Settlers* firmly in the modernist tradition of linguistic self-consciousness--the distrust of language and the search for communication beyond words. And John Moss adopts a similar strategy in his four-volume critical anthology on the Canadian novel. He groups together selected works in terms of "discrete stages in the novel's development" (7), and thus his arrangement establishes its own narrative context: the development of the Canadian novel is laid out in sequence from its beginnings to what Moss calls the "present tense" of contemporary writing and postmodernism. Within this developmental framework, texts by authors such as Ostenso and Grove are described as "modern" and are implicitly valued as examples of writing that bridges the distance between realism and modernism.

These tentative first steps toward a re-evaluation of widely-held critical assumptions indicate both a general dissatisfaction with the established view of prairie fiction and the beginning of a "paradigm shift" in the epistemological underpinnings of reading. Traditionally, the narrative impulse that underlies much of Canada's critical discourse argues for unity and coherence in interpretation; and interpretation has become an institutional practice sanctioning consensus rather than pluralism. As I have noted, one serious consequence of such shared prior assumptions is the narrowing of critical focus: instances of landscape depicted as an extension of character are often "overlooked"; examples of linguistic self-consciousness are "missed"; and evidence of an emergent modernism is resolved into a narrative intent on documenting the development of prairie realism in the prose fiction of the twenties.

But can reading be otherwise? No reading can occur outside the conceptual boundaries of epistemology. Inevitably, as those boundaries shift, we note the limitations of prior readings; the traditional critical idiom (as marked by the use of words such as "overlooked" and "missed" above) continually seeks to correct, re-evaluate, and move toward an interpretation that shows mastery of the text. The contemporary critical inclination to question the assumption that Canadian literature constitutes an ideologically- and geographically-bound monologue certainly opens the door to new readings. But we should not mistakenly believe that these new readings are an essential property of the texts. Similarly, the new reading conventions promoted by Hutcheon and others are not based upon an objective taxonomy of postmodernist literary forms; such theorists appropriate the texts and insert them into yet another paradigmatic narrative framework: they establish a new consensus, and, institutionally, they establish a standard of "correctness" based upon how well various readings fit the developing critical context. Postmodernist theorists such as Hutcheon shift attention away from the social context of reading and, like Cameron and Dixon, "focus on form," on the so-called "autonomous world of literature"; but in so doing they domesticate the kind of discussion that postmodernist authors, texts, and readers seem to consider the most crucial. Above all, they avoid consideration of process as anything more than a thematic point of interest. Important as it is to interpret "what" a text means, as readers of postmodernist discourse, we are also obligated to interpret "how" meaning itself is created. This commitment to process rather than product marks a crucial difference between realist and postmodernist modes of reading.

The "Reality" of Textual Features

The potential for texts such as *Wild Geese* and *Settlers* to be read in realist, modernist (or postmodernist) contexts suggests that specific characteristics of texts do not determine absolutely the way they are read. As Terry Eagleton asserts, "one can think of literature less as some inherent quality or set of qualities displayed by certain kinds of writing all the way from *Beowulf* to Virginia Woolf, than as a number of ways in which people *relate themselves* to writing" (*Literary Theory* 9). Eagleton, we might note, does not eschew definition altogether: he still allows that there are "certain kinds of writing." But, if we begin to question "literature" as a "constant set of inherent features" (9), then, by extension, literary categories become a slippery basis for critical judgment and interpretation. With the possible exception of Stanley Fish--for whom there is no real difference between "different" texts (*Is There A Text* 170)--few would wish to push the argument much further and claim that the text is a blank slate free to be written upon by the reader.[3] A text does, after all, consist of words on the page, and these words are arranged in identifiable patterns. As Hutcheon's work suggests, we can list the distinctive features of various genres; and for many readers of any given period, these distinctive features will form a more or less stable point of reference. But just as at the lexical level the meaning of language changes with time and context, so more complex arrangements of signifiers change. A catalogue of distinctive features (a poetics) is only meaningful (1) within a specified context, and (2) for those who consent to its authority as an enabling schema. At a social level, of course, we need such reference points if critics hope to engage in anything but discussion of theoretical abstractions. However, it is becoming, I suggest, increasingly difficult to cite "textual evidence" as if that evidence constitutes an ideologically innocent and objectively verifiable entity. We cannot--and should not--avoid talking about the text, but, as the principles of the New Rhetoric suggest, the significance of textual features is always contingent upon our sense of the text's rhetorical context (a sense guided by our epistemological assumptions).

The sudden absence of objectively verifiable products presents a considerable challenge to traditional presuppositions, practice and authority. For one thing, the new perspective makes the formal definition of postmodernism something of a contradiction in terms. A recent review of *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* expresses what must be for many a shared dissatisfaction with the apparent variety of postmodernisms and the disturbing lack of consensus regarding postmodernism's formal features:

> Questions of form and style are frequently touched upon in this volume, but primarily to adjudicate local issues, as though they were incidental to major problems of definition, periodization and history. Early, High and Late modernisms and a variety of postmodernisms appear as reference points without sufficient specification of characteristic stylistic features. No consensus develops as to the elements that distinguish the emergent Modernism of Baudelaire or Flaubert from its full efflorescence in *Ulysses*, or to focus argument concerning Gertrude Stein's, Samuel Beckett's or William Burroughs' proper place in literary history. Depending on interpretive contingencies, such figures appear as late modernists or postmodernists; the question of whether some combination of residual stylistic features of Modernism and emergent stylistic features of Postmodernism can allow us to place them more accurately is avoided. (Tölölyan 87)

I have quoted at some length because, by missing the point of postmodernist reading and writing (and by missing it in such convenient detail), the reviewer goes a long way toward making my point for me: "specification of characteristic stylistic [or formal] features" inevitably depends "on interpretive contingencies." Difficulties of definition debated by Jürgen Habermas, Fredric Jameson, and the other contributors to *The Anti-Aesthetic*, and their insistence on treating considerations of form within political and historical contexts, suggests that "emergent stylistic features of Postmodernism" are not self-sufficient, objective entities. In other words, while structural features can be readily identified, their presence does not necessarily dictate the conditions of reader response; their significance, like that of any other linguistic feature, remains a matter of the reader's interpretation. Textual structures, that "network of different messages depending on different codes and working at different levels of signification" (Eco 5), only appear stable as long as their generic integrity remains unquestioned by the reader.

The implications of such a view threaten traditional notions of form and invite reflection upon the dangers of rampant relativism and subjective response. Certainly, to a critic steeped in the inherited reading habits of the realist tradition, any suggestion that the text does not control the parameters of its own interpretation must sound heretical indeed. After all, we can and do speak of genre as a definable constellation of distinctive features; we think of form as something separable from our perception of that form (as an object to be anatomized); and we have long established our notions of enduring literary value on the basis of formal categories. The whole New Critical enterprise was founded upon a shared conception of literary structure as rigid and systematic. And, significantly, as the latent formalism in the work of Hutcheon, Docherty, and Eco suggests, old reading habits die hard.

The New Critical notion of the text as ontologically self-sufficient (as somehow unaffected by epistemology) lingers on long after most of its theoretical relevance has been exhausted. It lingers, I suspect, for a number of partial but practical reasons: partially because universities and schools continue to employ New Critical techniques as the basis for classroom instruction in critical reading; partially because we *can* "read" a text as if it were a "verbal icon," and many critics seem satisfied to ignore the theoretical dimensions of their reading processes; and partially because "it makes a better story to talk of texts inviting or provoking responses than to describe readers creating texts" (78), for, as Jonathan Culler notes, "it proves no easier to say what is in *the* reader's or *a* reader's experience than what is in the text" (*On Deconstruction* 82).

Reading (in) the Postmodernist Condition

Writers such as Bowering, Atwood, and Kroetsch are not immune from the influences of this tradition of close reading, or from the inherited epistemology and ideology it dramatizes. Frame conflict seems inevitable. "Like many people of my generation," says Kroetsch,

> I was trained to be a New Critic before I knew I was being trained as a New Critic. It was only later that I realized that there was a kind of ideology operating in those teachers who were teaching me. I think that that's one of the things that made me uneasy when I recognized it, though I'm still as a teacher very much caught up in that and I think probably a lot of those reading strategies that I learned in New Criticism still influence me as a writer. (*Labyrinths* 31)

Writing and reading converge as mutually dependent creative activities. As we have noted, writing, like reading, is a matter of learned "strategies," interpretive frames that while they enable coherent "readings" also necessarily restrict both creation and perception of new modes of discourse. To read and write postmodernist fiction, we must unlearn our conventional strategies of realist response and return to a rhetorical orientation. The shift in perspective, however, is not easily accommodated, and it would be unreasonable to assume that postmodernist writers and readers can transcend completely the inherited formalist bias we associate with the realist tradition. Indeed, the developing postmodernist rhetoric of reading dramatizes the problems inherent in shifting from a product-orientation to a process-orientation.

Reader response to postmodernist fiction in general ranges from frustration to delight as the données of realism--rounded characters, mimesis, a reverence for the historical referent--are apparently abandoned in favour of a new relationship between fiction and life. Raymond Federman, one of the early North American spokesmen for postmodernism, coined the term "surfiction" (one of many attempts to label and "pin down" postmodernism in generic terms) and explained the new relationship this way:

> the only fiction that still means something today is that kind of fiction that tries to explore the possibilities of fiction; the kind of fiction that challenges the tradition that governs it. This I call SURFICTION. However, not because it imitates reality, but because it exposes the fictionality of reality. Just as the Surrealists called that level of man's experience that functions in the subconscious SURREALITY, I call that level of man's activity that reveals life as a fiction SURFICTION. ("Surfiction" 7)

In general, postmodernism rejects the traditional view of fiction as the mirror of reality: both reality and mimesis are seen as fraudulent. Consequently, postmodernist writing seeks to expose its own fictionality and, by example, expose the fictionality of daily life. The postmodern writer regards life as a kind of narrative, gaining "meaning only in its recounted form" (Federman 8). Life, according to many postmodernists, is a text to be written and interpreted, and history (existing only as historiography) is relegated "to the dustbin of an obsolete episteme" (Huyssen, "The Search" 35).

In postmodernist Canadian literature, the notion of fiction creating, rather than representing, life has gained currency as both a controlling aesthetic and a central theme. Books such as George Bowering's *Burning Water*, Robert Kroetsch's *What The Crow Said*, and Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* foreground the fictionality of history and the importance of individual perception by deliberately disrupting expectations of what and how the reader reads. Kroetsch says that "the fiction makes us real" (*Creation* 63); Ondaatje refers to the arrangement of facts in *Coming Through Slaughter* as "expanded or polished to suit the truth of fiction" (*Coming* 158); and Bowering calls *Burning Water* "a real historical fiction" (*Burning* 9). What is being stressed is the construction and reconstruction of narrative as a cooperative act between writer and reader. As a result, the focus shifts from the story to the writing and reading of the story. "The question of identity," says Kroetsch in "Beyond Nationalism: A Prologue,"

> is not exactly the Canadian question. That is an interpretive matter for people who already have their story. We ask, rather, what is the narrative of us? . . . The very ability to see ourselves is based on the narrative mode: the I telling a story of I, of we, of the they that mirror us. (88)

For Kroetsch, it would seem, the process of storytelling and reading is more important than the product (the story itself) and interpretation (critical reflection on what was read).

Postmodernist literature dramatizes this theme by promoting a new reading experience: "the whole traditional, conventional, fixed, and boring method of reading a book must be questioned, challenged, and demolished" (Federman 9). Aporia replaces narrative coherence and disrupts convention. The postmodernist alternative encourages the reader to reflect upon the process of reading and interpretation, and to participate in a more immediate manner in the construction of meaning. Rhetorical gestures encouraging the self-conscious contextualization of an otherwise habitual process do not change the process so much as they help make the process obvious. And, as evidenced by the "changing shape" of "realist" texts such as *Wild Geese* and *Settlers*, once the context of meaning shifts, readers tend to see and value different aspects of their immediate reading experiences.

In non-literary discourse, the context is shared by speaker/writer and listener/reader. Such pragmatic communication indeed depends upon this shared recognition of context. According to the principles of realism, literature is not, and never truly can be, Wordsworth's "a man speaking to men" ("Preface" 13): the author must address the reader through an interlocutor, through a persona. To be sure, voice and tone are constituent elements of all written communication, from the Throne Speech to the academic's grant application; but in literature, say the "realists," the persona has no legitimate external referent. The willing suspension of disbelief may allow the reader to "commune" with the author via the text, but, realistically, the author cannot be said to communicate with his reader. Conventionally, the moment the author usurps the role of narrator and intrudes directly into the narrative, the reader must adjust her sense of perspective, and realism suffers.

Of course, within conventional limits, a certain degree of narrative intrusion has long been tolerated. Nonetheless, postmodernism tends to alter this arrangement. The old world narrative cues--whether the Greek Chorus, or the reliable, authoritative intrusions of authors such as Fielding, Dickens, and Trollope--are modified for very different rhetorical effects. Postmodernist metafiction is said to invoke intrusions as a destabilizing element, impeding the audience's identification with character, and breaking illusion through self-referentiality.[4] If sense is to be made of the production (the text), the readers must force coherence--they must move from a contemplation of form to a participation in the performance.[5] The formal innovations alone, however, appear trivial when compared with the increased role of the reader and the emphasis upon reading as a creative, rhetorical act. Group predispositions, the readers' attitudes toward the text (and toward the interrelationship between author and reader), remain the critical variables in determining what meaning is derived from the reading process.

Reading as Critical Performance

By changing the rhetorical situation in which texts are read, postmodernist reading theories variously seek to overturn any linear conception of oral and written communication.

Theory takes on the didactic function of a critical interlocutor, guiding audience response by extending to writing the dynamics of production and response that have been traditionally limited to public speaking alone. As a result, the formal texts of realist fiction and the "performance texts" of postmodernism seem to reflect two very different kinds of reading experiences; they certainly imply two very different world views.

Traditionally the reader decodes the text in time by predicting and responding to textual cues, assimilating the pattern of assertions proffered by the narrator until the level of presupposition establishes a shared referential space. The reader is said to enter the world of the novel.[6] While the reader is nominally engaged in a temporal process, the world of the novel is held in the memory and experienced spatially. Similarly, the process of reading privileged by traditional literary criticism (even the readings of so-called process-oriented critics) is primarily spatial, not temporal. Despite the claims of Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, and the reader-response school, their readings are not step-by-step protocols of process; as Steven Mailloux points out, reader-response criticism does not describe the content of reading experiences that pre-exist the critical performance: "the critical performance fills these reading experiences with its own interpretive moves" ("Learning" 107). Formal patterns and motifs, once they are invested with significance by the reader, will, of course, subtly influence the reader's initial reception; and the more critically trained the reader, the more the primary reading experience will be shaped by *a priori* notions of critical methodology. As Shirley Neuman asks rhetorically in *Labyrinths of Voice*,

> Surely, one of the less pleasant things that happens to us as accomplished readers is that, as we get to know more and more about the rules [of reading literary texts], it becomes more and more difficult to spontaneously identify with the characters? That the more professionally one reads, the less emotion one has of a spontaneously mimetic kind? (70)

Neuman's self-consciousness about professional reading echoes Kroetsch's fascination with preliterate consciousness: "Can you learn your way back to naiveté?" (*Crow Journals* 25) he asks, "forced"--as one commentator has observed--"to search for preliterate consciousness in a voice that is eminently postliterate" (Lecker, *Kroetsch* 17).

One of the consequences of developing and practicing interpretive strategies is that the reading experience changes: imagine a truly naive reader, a reader with no prior knowledge of genre, form, pattern, etc. For such a reader, textual patterns would be recognized only upon reflection and thus as separate from his or her sense of the immediate process of reading. While the naive reader centres his or her attention on the immediacy of the reading experience, the critical reader subjects the text to intense, repeated readings, and is always conscious of an interpretive objective. Reading, for our idealized naive reader, is a temporal process; for the critical reader, the reading, the product of interpretation, is as much spatial as temporal.

In her preface to *Reading Frames in Modern Fiction*, Mary Ann Caws offers a clear picture of this critical tendency to spatialize:

> in the most widely read and enduring narratives, certain passages stand out in relief from the flow of the prose and create, in so standing, different expectations and different effects. We perceive borders as if signaled by alterations of pattern and architectural, verbal, or diegetic clues. (xi)

These framed sequences create "a privileged space and a remarkable moment, brief or prolonged, which remains in the mind thereafter" (Caws xi). Caws' description rings true, especially for those of us who have nurtured a critical habit of mind and are used to thinking about reading in realist terms as critical explication. But, in terms of a rhetoric of reading, such a view of reading leaves out an adequate explanation of the process by which readers interact with texts. Caws, like the reader-response critics before her, confuses the "moment" of reading with the "memory" of what was read.[7] Recognition of patterns that frame action and meaning is the business of critics, who, of necessity, must spatialize text by retrospectively foregrounding certain signifiers--by turning the process of reading into the product of critical memory. Interpretive reading, therefore, is metonymic: certain frames are privileged and regarded as representative of the text as a whole;[8] and the process of reconstruction necessitates the making of a new story, a kind of metatext contingent upon (but not identical to) the text.[9] Caws, on the other hand, tells us that certain enduring passages "stand out in relief from the flow of the prose," but she never explains why they stand out, or whether their significance changes as reading conventions change. For Caws, the text becomes a hypothetical construct frozen in time and insulated from the shifting horizon of audience expectations. Caws, like many contemporary commentators, seems locked into a product-oriented, realist theory of literary production and reception.

Postmodernism (and, to an extent, postmodernist criticism) seeks to destabilize the reader's conventional realist expectations and, at the same time, to celebrate the power of the reader. Self-reflexivity and the fragmentation of narrative by way of interruptions--by the sudden juxtaposition of unexpected viewpoints--cues the preemption of retrospective organization and, at least for the uninitiated, tends to focus attention on the immediate, on the process of constructing meaning. In a sense, by disrupting conventional response, the rhetoric of postmodernism invites us to participate in one of two ways: either we are invited to recover the "naiveté" of a primary reading experience, to suspend interpretation of form and involve ourselves in the surface-level performance of the text; or, as is more often the case with writers such a Bowering, Atwood, and Kroetsch, we are invited to reflect upon the rhetorical situation of meaning. Neither mode of reading requires us to suspend interpretation altogether, however. The notion of reading without interpretation strikes me as a meaningless critical concept. What changes is the focus of interpretation as it shifts from a realist concern for character and setting to a more rhetorical concern for the communication process (and the reader's role in the process). Together these two perspectives help constitute Bowering's "bilingual" reader, one who moves from epistemological confusion to epistemological awareness.[10]

In "Canadian Historiographic Metafiction," Linda Hutcheon tackles the difficult question of the relationship between readers and writers and confirms that, in self-referential (postmodernist) texts, "the act of reading participates in (and indeed posits or infers) the act of textual production" (228). Note that Hutcheon is not speaking here about the temporal process of reading--of perceiving--the text; she is looking at texts as patterns to be formally interpreted. Accordingly, she notes that the reception of the text and its production are "often overtly thematized or inscribed in metafiction" (229). This observation regarding theme provides an important insight: texts such as Bowering's *Burning Water*, D.M. Thomas' *The White Hotel*, John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (and, I would add, Bowering's *Caprice*, Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*) do "thematize" and thus foreground the collaboration between writer and reader. In these and other similar novels, the narrative voice typically discusses the process of narration by directly addressing the reader (or the implied reader) through a series of deictic intrusions intent upon shifting the reader's attention away from involvement *with* the story and toward a consideration of the construction and reconstruction *of* the story. In Bowering's *Burning Water*, for example, as Hutcheon notes, the narrative "alternates between narration of the process of writing or preparing to write (in the present) and the telling of Vancouver's past trials and exploits" ("Canadian" 229). Reading such texts may make us, as readers, keenly self-conscious about the process of interpretation. But it does something else as well. As I have already noted, what we call postmodernist literature generally seeks to make the reader self-conscious about the process at the point of perception. There are, as it were, two points of interpretive focus: (1) the meaning of the text and (2) the process of meaning-making.

Entering the New Rhetorical Paradigm

When we read novels such as *Burning Water*, or *What the Crow Said*, we are often at a loss to make sense of the narrative. It is not that these novels are incomprehensible or incoherent; the reader simply has to work harder to force coherence upon a form that, as David Lodge notes of postmodernism generally,

> *resists* reading by refusing to settle into a simply identifiable mode or rhythm, thus imitating, on the level of reading conventions, the resistance of the world to interpretation. (*The Modes* 224)

The reader's self-consciousness, then, is not simply prompted by thematic references to the construction of meaning; the primary reading experience (the perception of the text that precedes formal interpretation) is likely to be more pronounced for those encountering postmodernist/metafictional texts for the first time. As the reader begins to anticipate the rhetoric of postmodernism, attention to surface details (that is, the process of bottom-up decoding) gives way to a new rhetorical orientation wherein we set aside our realist expectations and begin to experience and reflect upon our responsibilities for the co-creation of meaning. The process, as I have described it, echoes the pedagogical models discussed in chapter 1--and for good reason. Canadian postmodernists share a central concern for the reader, and for teaching the reader new ways of knowing. Once again, the rhetorical conception of reading and writing as part of a collaborative communication model foregrounds epistemology as an ideological concern: the social dynamics and politics of our ostensibly innocent ways of knowing are shown contaminated by competing cultural forces; and the rhetorical acknowledgment of the writer and reader as participating agencies roots postmodern discourse in a particular situation, thus further implicating the discourse's historical and political dimensions. A concern for both cognitive process and ideology may be more obvious in the work of a writer such as Atwood, but, as I shall show later, it plays an important role for Bowering and Kroetsch as well. For now the important point is that, having conflated notions of reality and fiction, postmodernist writers (and readers) define a new paradigm--a rhetorical context-- that seeks to disrupt conventional realist perspective and delay conventional habits of interpretation until a more comprehensive, epistemologically-aware view is invoked. The text contributes to this new rhetorical context for reading, but the text's authority remains subject to the reader's sense of the rhetorical situation.

This new postmodernist view of reality and perception is not limited to literary texts and theory. The new paradigm, informed by a shift from a product to a process orientation, is reflected in a world where physicists working in the area of quantum mechanics tell us that subatomic particles cannot be measured or observed without changing the particles' nature; where linguists studying discourse are moving discussion of texts away from the hegemony of sentence-grammarians, who treat sentences as objects, as "verbal icons" to be examined independent of production and reception; where elementary school children are being taught to read according to theories that treat reading as an active construction of meaning dependent upon the reader's prior knowledge; and where reader-response critics, feminist critics, and deconstructionists continue to challenge the authority of the text as a repository of meaning. John Harker places this "relativistic spirit of the times" in an historical and critical context:

> In philosophy Husserl's phenomenology dismissed the preoccupations of logical positivism and postulated new ways of knowing and structuring reality through exploring man's subjective, inner life. In psychology the security of

> behaviorism, which had been the predominant model of human activity during the period of the New Critical ascendancy, was being challenged by the work of Jerome Bruner and others who were explaining man's behavior in terms of cognitively constructed models of reality, rather than the simple mechanism of the behaviorist's S--R paradigm. In linguistics, Chomsky repudiated the behavioristic formulations of Skinner and set up in their place a model of human language which placed the mind at the center, thereby reducing in importance the visual and oral forms of language as the focus of linguistic study. And, finally, even the tenets of scientific method were questioned by the work of Kuhn who argued that scientific theory based on empirically derived "facts" was actually founded on a highly subjective empiricism . . . . ("The New" 362-63)

The "new paradigm" has become the stuff of review articles wherein researchers such as Constance Weaver detail parallels between new paradigms in sciences, particularly quantum physics, chemistry, and biology, and new paradigms in reading theory. The emerging interdisciplinary paradigm, says Weaver, suggests that "the universe is more like an organism, a process, with no clear separation between subjective and objective, observer and observed, mind and matter" (302). Weaver draws extensively on such works as Fritjar Capra's *The Turning Point*, Gary Zukav's *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*, Fred Alan Wolf's *Taking the Quantum Leap*, Jeremy Campbell's *Grammatical Man*, and Alex Comfort's *Reality and Empathy*, as well as the work of David Bleich, Stanley Fish, Norman Holland, and Wolfgang Iser, and argues that the nominally distinct disciplines of science and contemporary literary theory actually share a common conceptual frame. Some of the key tenets central to the emerging paradigm are, as Weaver lists them:

> The basic nature of reality is process . . . .
>
> One of the most basic processes is transaction, through which entities are endlessly defined and redefined . . . .
>
> Thus at its most fundamental, reality apparently consists of transactive events in space-time, which underlie what we think of as separately identifiable "things". . . .

> There is no sharp division between "observer" and "observed," between "self" and "other." (299)

Process, transaction, and definitions of self and other--these are the elements of a new reality and a new rhetoric of reading in which author, text and reader converge at the moment of narration.

To offer an informed critique of the latest developments in physics, chemistry, economics, biology, etc., is beyond the scope of the present study.[11] Nonetheless, I think it fair to note that whether we are "reading" the properties of a light wave, the communication among molecules, or a novel by George Bowering, our interpretations will be guided by epistemological assumptions about both the nature of reality and our relationship to that reality.

Envoi

In the preceding chapters I have argued that the stories we tell about reading and writing are based on models of perception (schemata) that frame our sense of reality. Postmodernists, I suggest, consider the foregrounded "frame" as legitimate a subject for interpretation as the text itself. The "revolutionary" aesthetic that writers such as Bowering, Kroetsch, and Atwood invoke is not, then, as many critics would have it, a literary fad, an inconsequential indulgence, or simply an assault on conventional reading habits.[12] On the contrary, given the assumptions that underlie contemporary theories of reality and reading, authors such as Bowering and Kroetsch would argue that the truly extraordinary response is one which continues to valorize the atrophied narrative conventions of an increasingly obsolete world view. Bowering, Kroetsch, and Atwood are self-conscious rhetoricians narrating what they see in terms of how they believe humanity constructs reality. Or, in Bowering's "other words, the novel is now saying, 'Hey, I'm human, too!'" ("Painted Window" 36).[13] As enigmatic as Bowering's comment may be, it suggests that the focus on the production and reception of meaning puts humanity back in the picture. Banished by the "affective fallacy" and the "intentional fallacy," readers and authors alike lost significance--and the text became hermetically sealed from the pragmatics of daily life. Bowering's (Atwood and Kroetsch's) brand of "humanism" promises a new rhetorical arrangement.

The "new rhetoric" of Canadian postmodernism, the realignment of relationships among author, text, and reader, invites a reconsideration of how we define the object of interpretation. "Narration," as opposed to "narrative," becomes the privileged mode of communication as each author focuses on the processes by which writers and readers alike tell stories and make meaning. Postmodernism, it would seem, takes to heart the prevailing interdisciplinary view of reading as the active construction of meaning; and if the audience may be conceived as collaborating in the construction of meaning, we are no longer positing a static entity but a dynamic force acting both within and without the text.

The "new rhetoricians" (Bowering, Atwood, and Kroetsch) ask us to reconsider our traditional (epistemological) assumptions about story, character, and the process of interpretive reading. Their works question the traditional borders of verisimilitude, modulating the referent for "reader" between the figure invoked and the figure addressed.[14] Each of these authors writes novels that dramatize the notion of literature as both transaction and event: they help us understand and resolve questions regarding the nature of, and possibilities for, collaboration; the ethical and political responsibilities of defining oneself in the process of reading and writing; and the new consciousness of oral discourse and of reading as a kind of ongoing conversation. Generalizations, of course, tend to leave out a good deal: while it is fair to say that all three authors share a common view of reality as a narrative process, each's individual sense of the social and political implications of this new world view differs significantly. And it is to an exploration of these commonalities and differences that we now turn.

NOTES

[1] Portions of chapter 3 were published as "Exploring an Interpretive Community: Critical Response to Canadian Prairie Fiction." *College English* 50 (1988): 920-26.

[2] It might well be argued that those who promote quite different views of Canadian literature do so in deliberate reaction to the established narrative. In a sense, then, the nationalist narrative influences the shape of these views as well. For another prominent example of an alternative narrative, see B.W. Powe's *A Climate Charged* (especially "Fear of Fryeing: Northrop Frye and the Theory of Myth Criticism" 34-54, and "A Climate Charged: The Intellectual Atmosphere in Canada" 72-92).

[3] Stanley Fish argues that, while formalists point to patterns and claim "that they are available independently of (prior to) interpretation," these patterns "do not lie innocently in the world but are themselves constituted by an interpretive act" ("Interpreting" 479).

[4] Ihab Hassan offers a comprehensive "catena" of post-modern features in his "Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective."

[5] Linda Hutcheon notes that "postmodernist texts have reintroduced [the process of production in art] in their stress on performance." See "*Running in the Family*: The Postmodern Challenge"; also see Ihab Hassan's "Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective."

[6] For a detailed discussion of this view of reading see Georges Poulet's "The Phenomenology of Reading."

[7] In her more recent work Caws has begun to focus on perception, noting, by way of analogy, that "[t]o perceive the mashing of potatoes is another thing entirely from perceiving the mashed potato, and yet reader-reception theory continues to put the stress on how we read that mashed-up mess" ("Literal" 51).

[8] My treatment of the two stages of reading owes much to Michael Riffaterre's distinction between "heuristic reading" and "retroactive reading." See especially Chapter One of *Semiotics of Poetry*; my understanding of interpretative reading and of the way readers construct meaning is further indebted to Peter Brunette's discussion of film in "Toward a Deconstructive Theory of Film." Brunette notes that film interpretation is also "metonymic," and he discusses the notion of retrospective structuring in some detail:

> In effect, what this kind of after-the-fact sense-making involves is a version of the hermeneutic circle, in which certain signifiers are retrospectively privileged because they involve the elaboration of a certain textual signified, a signified which

> is achieved in its turn by repressing signifiers that don't "fit." (65-66)

[9] Brent, following Iser, calls this the "virtual" text--a rhetorical construction evoked by (1) the actual text, (2) the rhetorical situation within which the text is read, and (3) the reader's pre-existing world view:

> the reader relates the symbols of the text to his own repertoire of linguistic and world language to construct a virtual work that is as coherent and unified as possible. This virtual work, though a mental construct of the reader, represents the reader's best estimate of the propositions that the writer is attempting to communicate to him. (84)

[10] Robert Scholes notes in *Protocols of Reading* that

> Reading has two faces, looks in two directions. One direction is back, toward the source and original context of the signs we are deciphering. The other direction is forward, based on the textual situation of the person doing the reading. It is because reading is almost always an affair of at least two times, two places, and two consciousnesses that interpretation is the endlessly fascinating, difficult, and important matter it is. (7)

Scholes' "dialectical" concept of reading complements much of what I describe in Chapters Two and Three.

[11] For an insightful discussion of how "the general categories of hermeneutics can be applied just as well to the natural sciences as to the humanities" (99), see Stephen Toulmin's article on the "Construal of Reality."

[12] The litany of objections to postmodernist fiction needs no rehearsal here. Occasional asides, such as T.D. MacLulich's description of Robert Kroetsch's writing as "masturbatory self-celebration" (*Between Europe* 242), attest to the realist bias of many (perhaps most) readers of Canadian literature.

[13] Bowering points out in the same essay that such faith in the "humanity" of the novel "is the optimist's way of putting the case" (126). "There is an equally diverting cynical version" (126), he says--without really committing himself to either view. My reading certainly puts greater weight on the optimist's version, and I think that generally speaking Bowering's epistemology is an "optimistic" one.

[14] My terms "reader addressed" and "reader invoked" are based upon the categories Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford establish in their fine essay, "Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy."

CHAPTER FOUR

George Bowering As Radical Pedagogue: Teaching Reading as Collaboration and Accident

In "Extra Basis: An Interview with George Bowering," Laurie Ricou asks Bowering to talk about pedagogy, "about teaching in your books, if you do" (52). Bowering never responds directly to the question. Instead, he reveals that he sees himself as a "good, but not devoted," teacher; and he recalls how *Caprice* "probably began with a graduate course [he] gave on the Western ten years ago" (Quartermain 52). The response is not so much an evasion as it is a characteristic omission--and probably a reaction against what he sees as the pronounced moral didacticism of other writers, such as Margaret Atwood.[1] Nonetheless, Bowering remains intellectually and emotionally concerned about "teaching" the reader how to respond. Perhaps more than any other Canadian writer, he has attempted to theorize away the boundaries between critical and creative discourse; and as Eva-Marie Kröller says on the back cover of *Imaginary Hand*, Bowering's own critical and creative idiom, though typically iconoclastic and flippant, "only serves to disguise the committed, even stern, voice he assumes in his role as teacher and critic."

Not all critical readers are as convinced as Kröller that Bowering's work contains evidence of serious commitment. Some see Bowering's writing, and the Canadian postmodern generally, as both frivolous and a threat to Canadian culture; and, significantly, such critics as T.D. MacLulich locate postmodernism and the reading practices associated with postmodernism as pedagogical problems. Fearing a decline of interest in the work of Grov Callaghan, MacLennan, Buckler, Ross, Mitchell, Wilson, Laurence, Richler, Davies, and Munro, MacLulich argues:

> Our universities should be encouraging such writing, rather than calling for experimental or language-centred fiction. After all, what will we get if Canadian fiction wholeheartedly adopts the international style? At best, we will see more incarnations of *The Studhorse Man* (1969). At worst--and this is a more likely result--we will get more works like Chris Scott's *Bartleby* (1971) or George Bowering's *A Short Sad Book* (1977) and *Burning Water* (1980). The games that these works play with Canadian themes may not announce the health of a national tradition, but may predict its death, crushed by the weight of excessive self-consciousness. (252-53)

For MacLulich, the realist paradigm remains an unquestioned (and seemingly unquestionable) presupposition: "When there is an emphasis on technical innovation in fiction--and a concurrent denigration of the straightforward mimetic possibilities of fiction--then our fiction may lose its capacity to mirror the particularities of culture and personality" (250). The indictment is a serious one. MacLulich implies that, by reading the Canadian postmodern, we are collaborating in the collapse of interest in issues of social import. Moreover, he argues that, since formal "instruction in Canadian literature is now the single most important factor in shaping the future readership for Canadian writing" (248), what we teach has serious social consequences. MacLulich is surely right to draw attention to questions of curriculum and the role of instruction in the development of a readership; but he goes too far when he suggests that enthusiasm for teaching and reading the postmodern is simply a matter of satisfying "the latest dictates of literary fashion" (249). If, contrary to MacLulich, we start with the assumption that there may be a serious social purpose to Canadian postmodernism, then we are obliged to reconsider the ethics of reading Bowering and what his work teaches.

Taking Bowering Seriously

In this chapter I shall attempt to highlight the serious side to Bowering's view of reading--by focusing on *Burning Water* and *Caprice*, two-thirds of an as yet unfinished trilogy very much concerned with the subject of reading and interpretation. "I believe that reading comes before writing and speech," says Bowering, reflecting on the composition of the two novels.

> [R]eading involves, say, reading the sky to see what the weather is going to be like tomorrow. And then eventually people say, hey, I could actually put up something for somebody to read, like a little pile of stones, or blaze a tree [or write a novel]. (Quartermain, "Extra Basis" 65)

Burning Water explores the theme of reading as inner vision--"the difference between fact and fancy and imagination"; *Caprice* is much more interested in reading as perception--"*Caprice* is all about seeing things, and it keeps talking about various kinds of eyes and language" (65). But in both novels, the author depicts writing and reading as communal and consensual processes; he seems very aware that, in practice, readers use what writers say to construct and consolidate their own meanings. Writer, text, and reader collaborate, through the text and the space it brings into focus, to make meanings--meanings that take shape "beyond" the text.[2]

In his remarkable Prologue to *Burning Water*, Bowering offers a preface to reading in which he sketches just such a rhetorical space for the composition and reception of narrative. "When I was a boy," he begins in what first appears to be a conventional enough opening, "I was the only person I knew who was named George, but I did have the same first name as the king. That made me feel as if current history and self were bound together, from the beginning" (9). The apparently innocent coincidence of names provokes a recognition that the narratives of history have consequence for Bowering's developing sense of identity. Living in Vancouver prompts yet another series of highly personal associations: Vancouver, George

Vancouver, George the Third, and Bowering's own geographical and historical "involvement." "What could I do," he asks rhetorically, "but write a book filled with history and myself, about these people and this place?" (9). Neither poetry nor drama seems the appropriate form of the moment to capture Vancouver's voyage (and, by implication, Bowering's voyage) of discovery, so, sensing that only narrative will do, Bowering plans "a novel about us [Vancouver, Bowering, and the others], about the strange fancy that history is given and the strange fact that history is taken" (9). As the ambiguous pronoun "us" suggests, and as Bowering himself acknowledges, "that book had a lot of myself mixed up in it" (9).

But if for Bowering storytelling becomes an exercise in self-definition, for his putative subject, George Vancouver, it ensures the perpetuation of historical identity: "Without a storyteller, George Vancouver is just another dead sailor" (9). Both Georges, Bowering and Vancouver, depend on narrative, are constructed in narrative; and any attempt to decentre from the experience of storytelling, to pretend objectivity by hiding behind the conventions of realism, would only compromise Bowering's sense of narrative's power to authenticate.

Storyteller, subject, and, as Bowering makes clear in the conclusion of his Prologue, audience are all implicated in a complex narrative interrelationship that collapses conventional distinctions between oral and written discourse, history and fiction, writing and reading:

> We cannot tell a story that leaves us outside, and when I say we, I include you. But in order to include you, I feel that I cannot spend these pages saying *I* to a second person. Therefore let us say *he*, and stand together looking at them. We are making a story, after all, as we always have been, standing and speaking together to make up a history, a real historical fiction. (10)

The new rhetorical situation for reading depends, in part, upon how we perceive to be the status of the Prologue and its relation to the text that follows--an issue and a relationship problematized by Derrida. In *Dissemination*, Derrida reminds us that "Prefaces, along with forewords, introductions, preludes, preliminaries, preambles, prologues, and prolegomena, have always been written, it seems, in view of their own self-effacement" (9). The prologue introduces the text but traditionally "remains anterior and exterior to the development of the content it announces" (9). Derrida asks, "Couldn't it be read otherwise than as the excrement of philosophical [or narrative] essentiality--not in order to sublate it back into the latter, of course, but in order to learn to take it differently into account?" (11). Bowering's prologue, I suggest, needs to be read "otherwise."

If *Burning Water* centres on the author's presence, it simultaneously involves the presence of the reader, the other maker of meaning without whom the narrative would cease to exist as a process of communication. Vancouver and Bowering both rely on the reader, for

> as the voyage grew longer and the book got thicker he felt
> himself resting more and more on his faith in the readers:
> would they carry him, keep him afloat? (173)

Without the reader, the process of narration congeals into the product of narrative; but the "new rhetoric" of the Prologue, if accepted as an enabling circumstance for reading, creates a shared space that privileges communication and collaboration between writer and reader as both a controlling metaphor and a guide for reading postmodernist narrative. There is, as MacLulich and others repeatedly insist, a playfulness about Bowering's work: his wordplay, his *roman à clef* references, his provocative public statements on reading. But if we are going to read *Burning Water* (or any novel by Bowering) in the spirit that it is offered, we need to take the notion of "collaboration" seriously.

This is no easy task. Conditioned by a lifetime of reading "realist" fiction and theory, we may well wonder, for example, whether *Burning Water* presents Bowering speaking *in propria persona* or simply in the voice of a created narrator. "At the risk of being accused of succumbing to the 'intentional fallacy'," says one recent reader (Carla Visser) in an understandably tentative response, "I would . . . go so far as to call it the voice of George Bowering" (97). But the same reader, though she allows the author's presence in the narrative, resists the suggested conflation of author, character, and reader, insisting instead on reading a dual narrative: Bowering's story about the process of literary production and reception is said to "intrude" upon the narrative of Vancouver's voyage. And, in a conclusion that seemingly ignores Bowering's Prologue altogether, Visser notes that "the juxtaposition of the two stories forces readers to realize that it is the author who dictates what will 'happen' next, and not, as traditional 'realist' fiction would have us believe, reality itself" (98). Edward Lobb concurs, adding that "the presence of the author serves merely to draw attention to the artificiality of the work of art. By interrupting our willing suspension of disbelief, it makes an obvious point and spoils the reader's fun--the traditional fun, at least, of absorption in narrative" (123).[3] Another reader, Janet Giltrow, in an early review of *Burning Water*, complains about what she calls "the interpolated narrative":

> conveying some very ordinary details of the writer's life, the interpolated narrative embarrasses the text, lingering like an unnecessary excuse . . . . Chapters beginning 'He . . .' are no doubt deliberately ambiguous in reference; but when the antecedent George turns out to be Bowering rather than Vancouver, the reader is disappointed, for this version of the life of Vancouver is interesting, and the delays in advancing the story are exasperating. (118)

And elsewhere, Bowering's apostrophes are written off as "asides or pre-poetic gestures" in which "we begin to see Bowering's lack of genuine concern for his readers . . ." (Whalen 34).

Bowering's "new rhetoric" may ask too much of readers for whom "fun" is measured against Romantic notions of "belief" and suspended "disbelief"; or the irritated tone of some of these "disappointed" reader responses may indicate that Bowering's anti-realist objectives have hit their mark and gotten under the skin of unwary readers. But whatever the relative successes and failures of Bowering's narrative, his focus on the process of creation and his valorization of the reader as a partner in the production of meaning deserves further reading as an important contribution to a developing Canadian postmodernist aesthetic.

There are signs that the kind of rhetorical situation invoked in the Prologue to *Burning Water* may yet find a more sympathetic, more collaborative, response; published readings are beginning to address the problems and responsibilities of reading itself. In a brief essay in his *Reader's Guide to the Canadian Novel* (second edition), John Moss articulates what might be a common experience for those seeking to respond to the novel "on its own terms":

> In the first edition of this book, I wrote a fair acknowledgement of what happens within the text of *Burning Water*, without showing much awareness of its significance. That was five years ago. My essay was analytic and descriptive. My attention was directed somewhat myopically toward the fictional reality, as if it existed apart from the surrounding world and took precedence over it. This, in spite of Bowering's insistence, within the novel, that I as a reader do otherwise! The whole thrust of his work, at this stage, is against barriers between life and art. *Burning Water* insists that there is a world beyond the text. It does so, perhaps paradoxically, by repeatedly collapsing the illusion of reality within the text, so that we are thrown, again and again, back upon ourselves, reading. In attending to the collapse, I seem to have ignored myself--although my presence is crucial to Bowering's achievement. *Mea Culpa*. (32)

Moss' confessional tone and highly personal admission of guilt over earlier, less aware, readings, suggests the enthusiasm of a convert to a revolutionary world view. Moss probably exaggerates when he claims that "*Burning Water* is of itself a revolution" (35), though it might be argued that the focus on reading as a collaborative act makes *Burning Water* an important contribution to an ongoing postmodern conversation.

The intriguing aspect of the two responses cited above is that, while they focus on the same issues--on the (intrusive) presence of the author, and on the role of the reader--they reach very different conclusions. When Janet Giltrow complains about the "interpolated narrative" in

Burning Water, she does so by comparing the novel to a "projected," ideal text--one that is comfortably coherent, plain-spoken, and referential. "The structural commotion of flashbacks and fast-forward leaps, "she says,

> pesters this plain-speaking [that she finds in the travel sections] with stops and starts and recursiveness, making the narrative spasmodic just where the logic of travel demands that the story be advanced. (120)

Giltrow is by no means unaware of Bowering's probable intent in writing *Burning Water*; on the contrary, she acknowledges that "Bowering may see this as a contest between traditional and modern fiction" (120). She simply feels, however, that authorial intention is irrelevant here. The important issue is one of genre and the schema it demands: "Voyage narrative is neither realistic nor novelistic: it is documentary and compellingly linear" (120). For this reader, taxonomy takes on an imperialist role, which in turn takes us some distance from the initial reading process. Ironically, the description of the narrative "with stops and starts and recursiveness" sounds very much like a psycholinguist's version of how we do "in fact" read. Giltrow, though, has little interest in reflecting on process; she wants to get on with the story.

Moss provides a much more self-conscious, reflective account--all the while asserting that to read the novel "correctly" one must collaborate with Bowering in breaking down the conceptual barriers between art and life. Instead of shifting the responsibility for determining meaning from the text to genre, as Giltrow does, Moss speaks of the reality of the text "collapsing," and of the need to confront the reader's role as a co-creator of meaning. The difference in these two responses suggests that we need a better understanding of Bowering's view of readers, reading, and the interrelationship between life and art. We need to ask, then, How serious is Bowering? Does he lack "genuine concern for his readers"? And, to what extent does his conception of reading influence the rhetorical direction of his art?

Particular Accidents

The question of Bowering's seriousness is complicated by his abiding love of (and faith in) the aleatory aspects of life and language. There is certainly an element of whimsy to Bowering's rhetorical stance, but there is also a serious epistemological point at stake, and we need not become so distracted by what we perceive as a frivolous tone that we miss a serious message. Bowering, after all, has "always favoured tapinosis": "Tapinosis is a sneaky kind of rhetoric--it means the saying of very serious things in offhand language, in vernacular, even in slang" (*Errata* 61). Take Bowering's frequent references to things accidental. On a superficial level, an accident refers to a mishap often caused by inadequate planning or perception. For Bowering, on the other hand, the accidental illustrates the very nature of how we read and write narrative. He is fascinated by those moments when the discovery of meaning occurs "accidentally," for the accidental tends to prompt both a sudden recognition of interpretive processes and an invitation to integrate accidental meaning into a narrative of origins and causes. In *Errata*, for example, Bowering links his notion of the accidental to "intertexuality," which he says works best "as a series that looks accidental, that makes an order by apparent coincidence, synchronicity, let us say" (6). In the same collection of brief meditations, he tells an anecdote that illustrates his sense of writing and reading as intertextual, social, collaborative, and accidental:

> One morning I walked along Inglis Street in Halifax with Ted Blodgett, the poet. We saw a sign in a shop window: "Words." Then next door we saw a pizza oven with this word on it: "Blodgett." In moments such as that, literate people start looking for meaning. Or they pretend to, and often that pretense is made in fiction or poetry or conversation. Actually Blodgett and I knew that there was no meaning in the coincidence on Inglis Street. In fact, the lack of meaning is what made the event delightful. There is a lesson for the reader of contemporary poetry in this. A poem such as Robert Kroetsch's "Sketches of a Lemon" is delightful because the

> connections between parts of the poem are accidental, and devoid of systematic meaning trails. The walk along Inglis Street is metonymic. It is also highly readerly. Its meaningless conjunction of words has stayed with me, as Kroetsch's poem has, while other walks in Halifax, and other poems about fruit have faded. (65)

By reading such "texts," says Bowering, the reader becomes aware of his or her role as a maker of meaning. These aleatory moments constitute the brief epiphanies of Bowering's art: they point toward the necessity of a shaping consciousness to borrow and intertwine texts in new, meaningful arrangements and contexts. The "truly" accidental occurrence, like all texts, remains literally "meaningless" until the reader activates its significance. Meaning resides in reading, not in texts. For Bowering, the accidental thus becomes an aesthetic principle asserting the ascendency of process over product. Accordingly, he describes his writing as--or rather (ironically, as seems appropriate) his *Selected Poems* are subtitled--"particular accidents,"[4] collisions between words and world, where both author and reader collaborate as accessories before, during, and after the fact. One may distinguish, of course, between the truly capricious and that which merely "looks" unplanned. But Bowering seems to be saying that, since all language acts are socially constructed and therefore essentially collaborative, and since we do not have absolute control over the dynamics of that collaboration, some element of chance influences how we construct meaning at any given moment. We never perceive the text the same way twice--not because the text changes, but because we are not the same people we were a moment ago.

If the accidental informs interpretation, it also informs composition; more particularly, it informs the writing of a work such as *Burning Water*. Bowering, indeed, sees the whole inspiration for his novel as accidental:

> With *Burning Water* it started *by accident* when I was in London, Ontario and I couldn't write about that place. I don't know how it happened, or why it happened, but I was in the

> library and I found Menzies' journal, which had been published by the B.C. Government in 1933, or something like that. I don't know why I picked it up, but I took it home and I read it. ("Extra Basis" 59-60; emphasis added)

These aleatory moments insinuate themselves into all of Bowering's recent narratives, and they constitute a primary motivation for his writing and reading. "What I really like in a story," says Bowering,

> is that sometimes you have an experience when you are writing fiction, that something just happens nicely and you didn't think it was going to happen and it works and you say, 'Whoopee!' As if you were an outsider reading it and saying, 'Whoopee!' I love it when I find in somebody, or even in myself, a passage in a story that makes references to twenty other things that have happened in that book. Not necessarily logical ones, like repetitive colour, or an object, or something like that. ("Extra Basis" 61)

Bowering likens such moments of perception to "reading a system that you don't know, but are beginning to know" (61).

In *Burning Water* such moments are dramatized: while composing Vancouver's search for the Straits of Anian, the narrator notes that he took a break from his writing, walked around "the Tuscan capital" as a sightseer, and discovered by accident a painting depicting a sea called the "Strette di Annian" (36). In a similar vein, the narrator notes that Vancouver fixed his sailing date for All Fools' Day and that "he [Bowering] had landed in Trieste and begun writing on All Saints' Day" (81). The narrator remarks, "It was all coming together in the way he loved--this had happened other times, and when it did he flew before the wind" (80). This metaphor of flying before the wind, frequently reiterated throughout the novel, becomes a motif that links a Romantic faith in the importance of fancy and imagination and a postmodernist fascination with the accidental. Later in chapter 33, for example, we learn that the author

> had, this is true, dipped into Vancouver's journal for Johnstone's Straits, and come up with the word "fancy." It was like finding the Strait of Anian in Florence, and it was also like several other things, found. When he found these things he knew a book was going well, that is without oars, before a good wind. (145)

The aleatory alerts us to a system that we don't know, but are beginning to know. Accidents suggest small tears in the otherwise ostensibly seamless fabric of patterns that make interpretation predictable, comfortable, and seemingly objective.To understand the accidental in narrative we need to take note of perception--of how we perceive, of how we read. "I'm more interested in perception than structure" (29), says Bowering in *Craft Slices*; and elsewhere he muses,

> I would like to write a book, let us say a novel, an historical novel, in which once in a while a page is an actual mirror. If the reader has been deluded into thinking that the book "mirrors reality" or "holds the mirror up to history," the appearance of her own reading face might serve to shock her out of that error. (*Errata* 62)

The small shocks that Bowering sends his unwary readers argue for a renewed focus on epistemology,[5] and they repeatedly remind us that we are at least partly responsible for what we know and see: "reality is in the I of the beholder" (*Craft Slices* 28). As participants in, and co-creators of, the discourse, we need to recognize that simple inside/outside divisions will not hold:

> The place, the "out there," is not prior to human perception or activity; it is a result of someone's being in the world. "Environment" is not possible, because one cannot be surrounded by something he is a part of. (*Errata* 38)

Thus we do not so much "enter" the discourse; we become aware that we are already inscribed in (and by) discourse.

Only by refocusing his reader's attention on discourse as process rather than as product can Bowering establish a rhetorically aware audience. He is profoundly concerned with the ethics of reading and writing--with teaching appropriate modes of response. "Here is what one wants his reader to learn and know," he states explicitly in *Errata*: "that writing and imagining can be done, can still be done. One wants them to notice thinking, not to buy thought. That's thinking, not thinking about" (18). He wants his readers to engage the proposition that perception is a political act, that "we change the world by the manners in which we perceive" (*Craft Slices* 91). Bowering's rhetorical purpose, then, is not simply a self-serving search for a postmodernist audience; his sense of the political significance of language, though not as overt (or didactic) as that of a writer such as Atwood, informs his artistic vision.

We get some sense of his commitment to the political in an essay called "A Great Northward Darkness," where Bowering takes the position that, by flouting the conventions of realist fiction, writers such as Leonard Cohen (and George Bowering) offer an ethical and thus responsible aesthetic position. Of Cohen he declares:

> Despite the argument by naturalist writers that non-realists preach individualist escapism, it is easy to see that Cohen's concern is for a revolution of health in terms literary, physical, moral and political. Unlike the social realists, he knows that it is at best hypocritical to espouse social revolution through conventional and authoritarian aesthetic means. (*Imaginary* 6)

Surely this kind of political commitment underwrites *Burning Water*'s discourse on fact, fancy, imagination, and the shape of belief.

Politics, Language, and Epistemology

On one level, as Edward Lobb has discussed in some detail, *Burning Water* serves as a dramatic exploration of Coleridge's concept of imagination. Seen in these terms, the various references to competing ideologies and cultures might be seen as little more than an amusing if elaborate treatise exploiting such contemporary theoretical concerns as historiography, intertextuality, and imaginative perception. Lobb suggests that this is enough, that the novel "succeeds because it is interesting and funny . . . " and because it "avoids easy answers" (127). But the references to the collision of two worlds--European and Native--provoke more than an opportunity for "several funny dialogues between two Indians" (Lobb 113). When, for example, the two Nootka first catch sight of Vancouver's ships, their dialogue sets in motion a complex chorus of multiple discourses that ranges far beyond the kind of language available to them on June 10, 1792. But then historical time is not in command here: as the narrator of *Burning Water* notes ironically, "It could have been June 20 for all the two men who watched from the shore could care" (13).[6] The first Indian describes the ships as "two immense and frighteningly beautiful birds upon the water" (14), which prompts the second to explain that they are boats, "dugouts" with wings "made of thick cloth" (16). The first interpretation is coloured by the Indian's perception of himself as an artist (and by his desire to establish a place for himself among his tribe). A latter-day Caedmon, the Indian says,

> "I will open my mind to the Great Spirit, and create a song, and the song will reveal the meaning of the vision, and I will take it back with me to the tribe, where I will be accepted and welcomed as . . ."
>
> "A full man of the tribe." (15)

Such an objective, however understandable, breaches the second Indian's ethics of interpretation, for, by allowing himself to be carried away by fancy, the first Indian has prevented his imagination from guiding his senses. The second Indian explains all this to his friend by an analogy to fishing:

> I am discrediting only your fancy. Your fancy would have the fish leap from the water into your carrying bag. But the imagination, now that is another matter. Your imagination tells you where to drop your hooks. (16)

And a little later he advises that "You must allow our senses to play for your imagination" (16).

In terms of a rhetoric of reading, the first Indian's interpretation offers little more than an unbridled and self-interested subjective response. The second Indian argues for critical reflection tied to an appreciation of both the context and the process of interpretation. Significantly, what is at stake here is more than the credibility of a witness: the first Indian's fanciful belief that the sailors must be gods, however innocent (even amusing) it may seem, constitutes an open invitation to political oppression. Only by remaining watchful, and by reading the white signifier responsibly, can the Nootka assert their power to understand their world and tell their own story. Historically, of course, the indigenous peoples did not always read carefully enough. The wise Indian reader reappears in *Caprice*, looks back in time, and offers the following assessment:

> The people of my grandfather's grandfather's time paid the price for not watching everything the newcomers were doing. In our time the wise man will know everything that goes on in this valley. If we do not watch them carefully, some day they will make us drink poison and lock us up inside big stone houses. That is what my father's father told me when I was younger than you are now. (129)

Explorers such as George Vancouver offer ample reason for watchfulness. For Vancouver, the world is an experimental text to be read according to the objectivist terms of his empirically-based discourse. His vessel is a "fact factory" (186) measuring the serrated coastline, surveying the land, calculating the rainfall, documenting the vegetation, and assessing the native population--and life on board ship is little more than an "ineluctable daily sequence of facts": "the charts were covered with numbers and then rolled up and stacked in holes, waiting to be published at home. Vancouver even wanted to transform the Northwest Passage into a fact" (186). Language too is a mere fact to be mastered, and Vancouver's "trick of assuming the natives' tongue" (120) remains tied to an unshakable sense of mission: to chart, record, and claim both geography and inhabitants as wards of the Empire. "Learning a naked foreigner's tongue is the first step in creating some form of government," boasts Vancouver. He wants language, like everything else in his world to be rolled up and stacked in neat, objective holes. There is no room here for an appreciation of "accidental" meaning or whimsy, and, as Menzies instructs his captain, the illusion of objectivity costs Vancouver dearly: "You learn [the natives'] language," lectures Menzies, "in order to practise your control over them, while you never get close enough to them to listen to that language for a while and find out what they want" (150). Vancouver, however, remains an unwilling pupil. Questions about historical and ideological contingency--questions that might trouble his adulation of facts and his abiding faith in a knowable universe--never shake his realist commitment that the new world can be objectively charted, understood, and explained. As a result, he reads life the way he reads maps, expecting in both an exact and unmediated correspondence between signifier and signified. As he sees things, "the coast is there, under California sun or behind New Norfolk mist. So his charts would be there as well, fact now by perseverance, equal to the real" (242).

What Vancouver fears is that other kind of reading: the kind practiced by Menzies, the Scotchman who "could read his [captain's] skin and the colour of his eyeballs . . . [who] could look at the outside of his soul's vessel and make an estimation of the events transpiring inside" (73). When he sees himself through Menzies' eyes, Vancouver feels exposed both to others and to himself, for Menzies "had read his soul . . . had read it before it had been fairly perceived by [Vancouver] himself" (73). Vancouver defines himself in terms of the social and emotional distance between what he perceives as his self and others. Thus, appropriately enough, he casts himself adrift from the company of others: "He had been at sea all his life, and all his life at sea he had been creating the distance between himself and others" (99). He lives "inside his head," keeping a distance from those others "out there" (99). The hard-won distance makes Vancouver "a young *ne plus ultra*" (21), but one condemned never to see beneath the surface of things. In contrast, the Indians seek to understand their world through an exercise of the imagination that contextualizes people, places, and events in terms of stories based on community experience. Thus, for the natives, imagination (which yields insight) is more important than sight (which yields only fact). Indeed, according to the second Indian, the tradition of cannibalism in his culture relates to his people's reverence for imagination:

> I cannot be dead certain, but I believe I remember hearing that one person would eat a second person in order to consume that second person's imagination. . . . To transfer it from the person eaten to the person eating. (113)

The notion of identification of self and other through physical consumption offers a radical, even visceral, alternative to Vancouver's spiritual, emotional, and physical isolation. Where the natives eat words whole, Vancouver never develops a taste for more than their surface-level meaning. Vancouver prefers the company of boiled cabbage and vinegar: "This is the Communion I celebrate," he tells his young lieutenants, "in the true expectation that I will be safe in the companionship of the facts" (56).

Jeanette Lynes calls readers such as Vancouver "reader vandals," readers who seek to "leave the text having commodified or conquered its meaning" (73-74). On the other hand, though the Indians remain watchful, they nonetheless incorporate aspects of the invader's language into a sophisticated form of cultural conversation. Watchfulness does not mean withdrawal into social or linguistic isolation: the range of discourse (especially the puns) that the two Indians manage suggests a kind of polysemic defence against the white man's fixation with linear order, literal understanding, and historical accuracy. As I have already discussed, the first sighting of Vancouver's ships offers an initially dislocating *heteroglossia*; and the story about the consumption of an other's imagination illustrates the native's rather literally-minded commitment to preserving that *heteroglossia* as part of the community's collective imagination. But it is in the second part of Bowering's unfinished trilogy that the role of language becomes most pronounced. When in *Caprice*, for example, one of the Indians talks of his people's time--of his "grandfather's time" (128)--he characterizes history in terms of kinship relations, a temporal concept central to oral cultures. Cutting off the traditional catalogue of family references, his friend interrupts with the words "Et cetera," and the first Indian pointedly invokes a new discourse: "Very well, et cet-era" (128), he says. This is, as we are told, "not an Indian pun" (128); but, as noted earlier, one cannot speak outside the dominant discourse--and "if one is thinking at all, one is perforce bilingual" (*Errata* 96). Puns and other language-play allow the Indians a kind of linguistic high ground from which they can practice their bilingualism without suffering a loss of cultural identity through total assimilation. Thus this brief interlude over Indian and non-Indian puns offers a dramatic illustration of Bowering's concern for the definition of self and other through discourse; it points toward the political power of language, and perhaps more subtly, it argues that the notion of collaboration need not necessitate the subjugation of identity. As the Indian teacher advises, the trick is to "not assume all the invader's ways, but [to] make use of the particulars that will bring strength to the people" (*Caprice* 128).

Reading a Capricious World

To read the invader's ways and yet also be able to see what may or may not have value--such reading requires the kind of rhetorical perspective and ethical stance that eludes characters such as Vancouver in *Burning Water* and either Frank Spencer or his side-kick, Loop Groulx, in *Caprice*. *Caprice*, even more so than *Burning Water*, explores the rhetoric of reading; it teems with poets, readers, and teachers, and offers us a world where poems are tied to tumbleweeds and outlaws feign interest in Goethe; where "read[ing] sign" (129), whether in the form of books, laundry lists, people, or landscapes, becomes a principal preoccupation; and where virtually every character plays out the role of either teacher or student. The older Indian, for example, referred to as the "old teacher" (56), instructs his student in reading the ways of the world; Caprice, when young, announces "that she [is] going to become a schoolteacher" (21); Caprice's lover, Roy Smith, works as a teacher at the Kamloops Indian School; and even Loop Groulx is said to feel like Smith's "student or apprentice" (126).

Caprice thus presents life as a text to be written, taught, and, above all, read. As Stan Dragland notes, "Reading is a complex figure in *Caprice* . . . for the attempt to work out the way things are" (79). And the way things are is always a matter of interpretation: the older Indian laments the fact that he cannot read books the way he can read signs; while Roy Smith regards the enigmatic Caprice as one "living in a different alphabet" (76). What differentiates these readers from other less attractive figures is their capacity to reflect upon their interpretive processes, to worry words and attitudes into meaning. As Kröller observes, the "wittier characters in *Caprice* dismantle . . . words by punning, while the dimmer or more recalcitrant ones freely misunderstand them, confusing 'a patchy [country]' with 'Apache,' or 'motivation' with 'motive nation'" (164).[7] For the wittier readers of *Caprice*, I suspect, there is a clear challenge to reflect upon their own habits of interpretation.

When Caprice misreads a passage from Goethe's *Faust* as "build words" rather than "build worlds" (21), she is, in effect, reading meaning in--and in the process she alerts her readers to the causal relationship between words and world interpreted. Words shape reality, and thus for good reason men such as Loop Groulx "feel affronted when they see someone else reading a book" (21). And when Frank Spencer smashes a pen under his spurred heel, he reacts, albeit instinctively, in fear of the power of language to shape his life story: "[T]hrow that pen on the floor over here. Easy," he says to the journalist, Kesselring. "You aint putting me in history, damn you" (97). The point of focusing on this word/world relationship (in both *Caprice* and *Burning Water*) goes beyond mere postmodern high jinks or a literary nod to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, for, as I have tried to indicate, both novels speak directly and indirectly to issues of historical, political, epistemological, and ideological import. The point, ultimately, is to teach readers that successful interpretation often demands some level of self-consciousness about our terms of reference (our interpretive schemata). In particular, Bowering wants us to jettison the presuppositions of realism and come to terms with a new epistemic view. The shift to a postmodern, rhetorical perspective is no easy matter, and like the parade of characters who track one another across the interior landscape near the end of *Caprice*, many of Bowering's readers are, I think, "late in understanding . . . what is happening" (248). The older Indian offers one explanation of the difficulty some have in "reading":

> They have been late in understanding it [the narrative of their lives] because they have been trying to understand it in terms they are accustomed to. They have their peculiar notion that . . . actions can be explained by looking into the individual heart and head. (248)

Such humanist (realist) notions seem inadequate when compared to the everlasting narrative of the landscape and its people: "no single person's story could amount to much in comparison. No human being could walk or ride under that immense blue sky and remain a humanist" (198). Bowering, presumably, would be happy if his realist readers underwent a similar transformation in the process of reading *his* narratives.

Bowering's Rhetoric of Reading

The difficulty lies in learning to leave the conventions of realism and realist response behind, or at least under erasure. Bowering himself has struggled with an ongoing fascination for the surface level of language, and this fascination with the ludic potential of words has led some commentators to dismiss his work as inward looking, self-indulgent, shallow. Smaro Kamboureli, a critic who praises Bowering's playfulness, describes his fiction as "an act of consciousness, an art of surfaces" ("A Window" 211), and it is certainly true that this play of the writer's and reader's consciousness with experience "occurs," at least in part, "on the surface of fiction" (Kamboureli 210). That is, due to the novelty of their arrangement or expression, the words on the page seemingly call attention to themselves; conventional reading strategies are frustrated, and readers, if they are to continue reading, must reevaluate (or readjust) their habits of prediction (their anticipatory schemata). In a novel such as *A Short Sad Book*, says Lynette Hunter, things are set up "to get the reader to move the counters of literary expectation, but there is no particular end, no way of winning the game and reaching a conclusion or answer" (155). Such writing is said to be elitist, appealing only to the literary community in the know, and "profoundly abstracted from the actual world, from reality" (Hunter 155). Some of Bowering's early critical comments, especially those about "the potentialities in the surface" of art and the possibility of "literal prose" (*Mask* 120), do suggest the image of the text as potentially stable and unmediated. And it may be that such images reflect the kind of frame conflict that we saw in Hutcheon's story of postmodernism: they show Bowering's difficulty in "quite divorc[ing] himself from modernism" (Kamboureli 211). But, in Bowering's developing rhetoric of reading, a rhetoric worked out in his many creative and critical explorations of reading since *A Short Sad Book*, "Modernism Could Not Last Forever," and "The Painted Window," a modernist conception of text no longer holds. Notions of an objectively knowable text do not shape the rhetoric of Bowering's recent narratives. Bowering's prose fiction may well be a "fiction of unrest," as Kamboureli calls it, but those tensions between the pull of modernist and postmodernist aesthetics should not be regarded as irreconcilable. The surface of writing does exist, after all; it is simply not inherently meaningful, for, to quote Brummett, "sense data [words] by themselves are not experience" (28). A rhetoric of reading postmodern narrative, like all top down theories of reading, acknowledges the significance of the signifier: it does not ignore the words on the page; it merely argues that their meaning must always be subordinate to the rhetorical experience of reading.

To speak then of Bowering's writing as an "art of surfaces," or of Bowering as a writer preoccupied with protecting "the signifier from the *reader*" (Lynes 68), captures only a partial view of Bowering's rhetoric of reading. Lynes makes the case that, for Bowering, neither the audience nor the author remain constant; and thus she concludes that "only the text holds a stable position" (68). This assumption of "text as centre" leads Lynes to argue that "the signifier is always in danger. The signifier must be protected" (68). As she sees reader-text relations, the author must remain vigilant against bad readers who would "vandalize" his intended meaning. But surely to insist upon Bowering as an author preoccupied with protecting the text as centre is to place him in the company of George Vancouver and Frank Spencer.

Kamboureli, Hunter, and Lynes draw our attention to Bowering's concern for language, to his concern for getting the words right; and certainly, like any author, Bowering invests a lot of himself in his work and, as a result, may wish to enlarge his audience of sympathetic readers. But I see no evidence that Bowering believes it is possible to freeze the signifier's meaning. The notion of protecting the text may refer to an understandable impulse, but it cannot be considered the premise for a theory of reading. I do not want to suggest, of course, that any movement from the product-orientation of realism to the process-orientation of postmodernism and the New Rhetoric is likely to be made without experiencing some sense of the confusion and contradiction that accompanies frame conflict. We need not insist on epistemological purity. What I would suggest, though, is that Bowering's critical and creative narratives offer a coherent and thoughtful story of reading as a collaborative rhetorical process.

We discussed earlier Kroetsch's recognition that the product-oriented reading strategies of New Criticism still influence his writing and reading. And, significantly, while neither Bowering nor Kroetsch espouse a product-oriented world view, they remain wary of the term "process": Kroetsch argues that "we've overused the word 'process' beyond belief," and Bowering says that he is "quite willing to let it go" (Miki 135). "I'm much more interested in the 'random,' or chance, than I am in the 'processual,' I think" (135), continues Bowering, though he acknowledges that the term "process" helps distinguish certain contemporary views of reading and writing from the view insisted upon by the New Criticism:

> I guess you'd have to write an essay about what "process" means to you, as opposed to what it means to somebody else. But when the word "process" came up in discussing poetry it was usually opposed to "product." . . . And product poetry, it seems to me, is what the New Criticism was interested in: a poem in which everything you can possibly find out about the poem is already there. So if there was any failure at understanding the poem, it wasn't that the poem didn't embrace that thing that you didn't find; it was that you didn't find the way into it. And to me, the notion of "process poetry," for the reader, is that it's not necessarily inherent in the poem. Or needn't be understood as inherent in the poem, unless somebody with a completely different matrix of experiences comes to the poem and finds it in the work. (135)

Once again we see that Bowering's aesthetic position hinges upon his sophisticated understanding of reading as a top-down interaction--as an interpretive process of "coming to" the work and thus of situating that work within a "matrix of experiences." And what is true for "process poetry," as we have seen, is true for *Burning Water* and *Caprice*. His preference for characterizing the processual in terms of "the random" or "chance" remains of a piece with his commitment to what I have called the accidental; and, moreover, when he moves from poetry to prose narrative, the corresponding emphasis on plot allows him full range to explore notions of seeing and of reading as particular accidents inevitably influenced by personal and cultural matrices of experiences.

By invoking notions of history, culture, race, and political empowerment, Bowering's rhetoric of reading confronts the ahistorical, apolitical, and generally arhetorical characteristics often associated with postmodernism. Bowering's postmodernism, then, actively engages the question of how to assert commitment and advocacy in a postmodern world. If we essentialize postmodernism, we'll likely conclude that it offers neither a social direction nor a political agenda; but if we think instead of Bowering's position as one of a variety of possible postmodernisms, one with a clear rhetorical purpose, we place ourselves in a better position to understand his concern for reading as metaphor and process. As Hunter argues, "Bowering describes a long-term process or potential reconstruction [of a new humanist ideology] . . . which can help in constructing valid actions in a fragmenting social order" (159). Although Hunter worries that an emphasis on process may embroil Canadian postmodernists in anti-political and anti-referential word games, she recognizes that Bowering offers us a way "of positioning ourselves politically by insisting on the provisional or the intertextual" (159). In other words, Bowering encourages a recognition of rhetorical realities: that reading and writing are thoroughly rhetorical arts, and that reality itself is collaboratively constructed. Readers, writers, texts, and, as E.D. Blodgett notes, even Canada, are not objective entities but sites of "discursive conflict" (141). Reality is an argument continually advocated and contested.

As I have tried to show in this chapter, Bowering's view of reading as metaphor and process shapes both his fiction and his developing sense of interpretation as a political act. *Burning Water* and *Caprice* do not represent a retreat from the world--from the social and ideological forces that shape our sense of how fact and fiction are constructed; as Bowering says, his writing simply offers readers "another way to make the connection."[8] The two conflicting world views (white and native) dramatized in *Burning Water* and *Caprice*, for example, offer readers a clear sense of the political implications of interpretation. Despite the humour in both novels, we are constantly reminded that the white invaders brought disease, alcoholism, and oppressive laws; that they murdered the natives "by the thousands, sacked their cities, defiled their holy places, erased their alphabets, melted down their gold, and brought half-breeds upon their women" (*Burning Water* 166-67). Like Peter Puget, the white explorers and settlers "felt the same way about commas that [they] felt about natives. The fewer the better" (207). Insensitive, wrongheaded, and otherwise obtuse readers such as Puget, Vancouver, and Spencer, suggest clear examples of how we should not read Bowering's work. To read the world through a filter of unexamined ideology ensures our participation in the maintenance of the dominant discourse. Only by reducing the distance between self and other, between reader and author, can we read collaboratively and responsibly. The only way in is to enter the conversation--to become perforce bilingual and conversational. With the narrator of *Burning Water*, we need to consider the woman who "had often been accused by herself and others of making novels out of what other people think is conversation" (80); and like the two Indians in *Caprice*, whose "conversations [seem] . . . to threaten a kind of dispersal, to wander into byways that did not lead to the advance of education" (129), we are invited to engage with Bowering in the telling of story, in the making of meaning, and in our own education as readers. Bowering's novels too are "conversational," and what Bowering seems to be saying is that the postmodern artist has no other legitimate way to tell his story: all discourse is inherently dialogic, a matter of seeking to reach oneself and the other through language by creating as many "exits and entrances" as possible.

NOTES

[1] In conversation Bowering is critical of Atwood's didactic approach. Bowering discussed the matter with me in Kamloops, B.C., on February 15, 1990.

[2] I am grateful to James. A. Reither for his help in shaping my understanding of reading as a collaborative process.

[3] Lobb does allow that Bowering's interruptions are "engaging": "His interruptions are usually funny, and, more importantly, they are thematically apt" (123).

[4] Robin Blaser, the editor of Bowering's *Selected Poems*, notes that the subtitle comes from Act V of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*:

> Sir, I invite your Highness and your train
> To my poor cell, where you shall take your rest
> For this one night; which part of it, I'll waste
> With such discourse as, I not doubt, shall make it
> Go quick away: the story of my life,
> And the particular accidents gone by
> Since I came to this Isle.

See *Selected Poems* (154).

[5] Bowering writes in "Modernism Could Not Last Forever," "A few years ago I told Frank Davey that I thought modernism was ontological in purpose, & post-modernism is epistemological" (*The Mask* 82).

[6] Leslie Monkman notes that "Bowering's Nootka range through three centuries in their vocabulary and syntax. . . . Implicit in these linguistic shifts is an attack on the irresponsibility inherent in European homogenizing of red and white worlds through language" (90).

[7] Kröller develops this notion fully in the chapter on *Caprice* from her book-length study on Bowering, forthcoming from Talonbooks. I am grateful to professor Kröller for granting me permission to quote from her manuscript.

[8] Bowering made this comment during a conversation with me about the difference between his notion of narrative's relationship to everyday life and Atwood's more overt insistence on its role as a moral guardian of the community. The conversation with Bowering took place in Kamloops, B.C., on February 15, 1990.

CHAPTER FIVE

Reading, Writing, and the Problem of Self-Definition: Entrances and Exits in *The Handmaid's Tale*[1]

Like the addressed reader of *Burning Water* and *Caprice*, the reader of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* figures prominently as a force helping to define the narrator's identity, the process of narration, and the nature of narrative (of story). For Offred, the process of the narration (and the possibility that a future audience will hear her story) provides her with a measure of control in the otherwise oppressive silence induced by Gilead's totalitarian regime. "If it's a story I'm telling," says Offred early in the novel,

> I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off.
>
> It isn't a story I'm telling.
>
> It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along . . .
>
> A story is like a letter. *Dear You*, I'll say. Just *you* without a name. Attaching a name attaches you to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous: who knows what the chances are out there, of survival, yours? I will say *you*, *you* like an old love song. *You* can mean more than one. (37)

As Offred's internal dialogue suggests, her narrative *is* and *is not* a story she's telling; ironically, and with a phrasing concordant with Bowering's treatment of factuality, "the world of fact," so-called "real life," is described as the place signified by "[a]ttaching a name": life is made real through naming. But if Offred's tale represents, as I shall argue, an act of self-definition for the narrator, it also reaches out and, in the process, gives definition to the necessary "other," the reader invoked and addressed.

Again, as we saw in *Burning Water* and *Caprice*, the problem of reading manifests itself as a major theoretical and practical question, for we are not only encouraged to think about both the epistemological and ontological status of reading (and readers); we are also prompted to practice a new role as collaborators in the making and preservation of meaning. Atwood wants her readers aware that just as the process of telling her tale helps Offred define her self, so readers' responses to texts constitute political acts of self-definition.

Atwood's didacticism has always been an important element in her work; I share Frank Davey's sense that "[m]ost of Atwood's fiction . . . seems written at least in part to render a commentary on contemporary society" (*Feminist* 165). Indeed, in *Second Words*, Atwood defines the "novel proper, as distinguished from the romance and its variants, [as] one of the points in human civilization at which the human world as it is collides with language and imagination" (417). Language, especially the politics of language, becomes, naturally enough, Atwood's primary focus. Not that she is the only contemporary Canadian author concerned about the role of language in society; Atwood shares that focus not only with Bowering but with a number of modernist and postmodernist authors--Margaret Laurence, Daphne Marlatt, bpNichol, Robert Kroetsch, Michael Ondaatje, among others.

The literary company she keeps has made the reading of her novels problematic for some critics. Davey, for example, complains that, unlike Kroetsch, Atwood shies away from the postmodernist sentiment that "language in its oral form" (*Feminist* 165) constitutes an antidote to what he sees as the static language of history and book. George Bowering says that "Margaret Atwood is a writer who does the expected, usually, and the sensible: that is, her novels are conventional in structure and quickly comfortable in form" (*Imaginary Hand*

111). Linda Hutcheon attributes a "modernist (or 'postmodernist') self-consciousness" ("From Poetic" 21) to the parodic elements in *Lady Oracle*, and she sees Atwood as someone who "is at ease with the political dimension of postmodernism, and always has been" (*The Canadian* 138). Philip Kokatailo, speaking of *Surfacing*, claims that the novel "partakes of both the modern and post-modern characteristics of form . . . but it is neither a strictly modern nor post-modern novel. Its form demands that *Surfacing* be read as both" (155). And John Moss terms *The Handmaid's Tale* "postmodern, though only by default since Atwood seems to work intuitively rather than intellectually beyond the strictures and illusions of modernism" (*A Reader's* 7). Thus Atwood's recent novel (a novel that, as I have noted, deliberately foregrounds the role of the reader) seems likely to generate still further discussion about how we should read her work.

Though the muted metafictional and postmodernist echoes in the novel might suggest a privileging of the aesthetic over the pragmatic, I shall argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* conforms to a consistent rhetorical purpose (didactic in nature) that informs all of Atwood's novels: her desire to teach her audience how to read the world. She sees her writing as a way of communicating rhetorical and political realities; and she is generally critical of those experimental authors who "stop writing for readers *out there* and write for readers *in here*, cosy members of an in-group composed largely of other writers and split into factions or 'schools' depending on who your friends are and whether you spell I with a capital I or a small one" ("End" 431). The reader "*in here*," whether the member of an in-group or a conjectural projection of the group's theoretical preoccupations, seems considerably easier to identify than the reader "*out there*," the actual reader of narratives. Like Bowering's conflation of the reader invoked and the reader addressed, Atwood's invocation of the reader always implicates the reading practices of the reader addressed outside the novel.

While she may have more in common with writers such as Bowering, Kroetsch, and bpNichol than she believes, Atwood is nonetheless openly hostile to the cultivation of a private aesthetics divorced from the form and responsibilities of public discourse. Accordingly, *The Handmaid's Tale* invokes the conventions and themes of postmodernism (especially those conventions common to Canadian postmodernist texts) in order to reinsert them back into the narrative of daily experience. Atwood's *Tale* invites a re-evaluation of reading, interpretation, and the postmodern condition.

The Politics of Narration

The Handmaid's Tale provides an intriguing point of reference for anyone interested in defining the "narrative" of Canadian postmodernism. Though it shares a decidedly postmodernist view of narrative and history, and though it does encourage the reader to share in the "performance" of the text, Atwood's novel may not seem of a piece with works such as *Burning Water* or *Caprice*. The main difference lies, I suspect, in the novel's rhetorical intent: questions of epistemology, though crucial, are often overshadowed by the drama of ideology. *The Handmaid's Tale* seems to be primarily about politics rather than perception; but, as I have already discussed at some length, politics and ideology become rhetorically significant in terms of their ability to shape how and what we know.

The themes of postmodernism are naturally attractive to a politically and aesthetically self-conscious writer such as Margaret Atwood. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, she adopts the theory of history as narrative, making it a *leitmotif* in her examination of the relationship between political power and individual identity. But, in Atwood's fiction, aesthetic concerns are always tempered by didactic intent. For Atwood, after all, fiction writing is "the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community" ("End" 424). As an author, she wants her reader engaged in interpretation, not lost in the funhouse of perceptual confusion; and, thus, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood encourages her reader to treat the near-future setting as an extension of our existing world. The narrator consistently filters her perception of the futuristic Gileadean society through a decidedly contemporary frame of reference.

Early in her story, the narrator, Offred, establishes an intimate, confessional tone. The situation is new, but the shared frame of reference--memories of mini-skirts, punk-rock hairdos, dances in high school gymnasiums--mediates against the initially obscure comments regarding "Aunts" and "Angels." Offred's desire to reach across the space of cots set up in rows (a gesture reminiscent of Rennie's reaching out to Lora in the final pages of *Bodily Harm*) establishes a desire to communicate that dilates into her larger rhetorical purpose: to make meaning out of her life and to communicate her story to a future audience.

Offred is very much the self-conscious storyteller in search of an audience:

> Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden. But if its a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else. (37)

The reader is clearly implicated in the narrative process, and the direct address draws us closer to the narrator. We are confidants, participants even, in a love song. Pragmatically, our job is to listen, sympathize, and learn from Offred's testimony.

In the final section of the novel, however, Offred is no longer the narrator. Her role is replaced by the "Historical Notes" of a future academic audience looking back at Offred's narrative as documentary evidence of a past culture. The reader's role too is usurped, embedded in the subsequent narrative of Professor Pieixoto et al., and the whole pragmatic structure of the once intimate fictional communication situation is shattered. The narrative frame shifts; the "Historical Notes" chime the unmistakable ring of closure upon a hitherto open-ended narrative process; and the reader will likely slip from the role of tacit participant to that of detached observer.[2]

In the hands of a "more" postmodernist writer, the narrative shift might be an occasion for *aporia*, leaving the reader "without passage" to determinate meaning. Atwood, though, is too didactic an author to leave her reader lost for very long. What is disrupted is not meaning, but the pragmatic aspect of storytelling as a performance between teller and listener. I say "between" because traditionally the oral tale--Offred speaks, not writes, her narrative--constitutes a community event, a speech act in which the listener, through his or her reactions, helps shape the tale. The oral narrative does not exist as text, but only as the shared space of performance between teller and listener.

J.L. Austin's Speech Act theory (outlined in *How To Do Things With Words*) calls such shared space the result of the "illocutionary rules" of discourse. According to Austin, every utterance possesses an illocutionary force, a rhetorical cue as to how the utterance is to be received (as a command, a request, a promise, a threat, etc.). No utterance exists meaningfully as pure discourse abstracted from contextual constraints.[3] By introducing the context of a future audience at the end of Offred's narrative, the "Historical Notes" break the illusion of performance and remind the reader that we have been reading a fictional narrative, which, like all literary works are, "discourses with the usual illocutionary rules suspended" (Ohmann, "Speech" 53). This seems fair enough. Despite the psychological realism of Offred's perceptions, we are unlikely to confuse her with an historical character; and even though the narratives of literature and history share a fictional impulse, they are not quite identical. We may not "know" George Vancouver, Almighty Voice, Buddy Bolden, etc., except through texts, but few would argue that our ethical commitment to the characters of history (or of "a real historical fiction") matches our commitment to "Offred." For the fictional audience dramatized within the final section of the novel, however, Offred should not be perceived as a fictional character but as a witness to history. It comes as something of a shock, therefore, to read the International Historical Association Convention of 2195 treating Offred's "Tale" as "acts without consequences of the usual sort, sayings liberated from the usual burden of social bond and responsibility" (Ohmann 53). Richard Ohmann argues that when the illocutionary force of discourse is suspended, as it is in literature, the reader "is neither contractually nor morally implicated, nor in any way bound by the act in which he participates" (56); and from a realist perspective, this is surely true. But Atwood's *Tale* (and postmodernism generally) seems determined to confront such notions of the reader's role in the construction of meaning, for, in rhetorical terms, the break with the illusion of performance implicates a new "burden of social bond and responsibility": the reader now becomes aware of her own complicity as part of a community of interpreters whose presence, and shared conceptual bases, frame what can and cannot be read. The "Historical Notes," then, free the reader from her "realist" role as collaborator and confidant, and prompt a metacognitively aware "rereading" of the "Tale" held in the memory.

Reading (in) Offred's "Real" Name

I do not wish my use of the words "free" and "prompt" to suggest that the text alone directs such response, for as I discussed at length in the opening three chapters, other readers with other conceptual bases will recognize quite different "prompts." The text exists as "black marks on a page," but the interesting aspects, and the significance we bring to them, are always a matter of the reader's predispositions (her "anticipatory schema"). Other readings are always eminently available. Constance Rooke, for example, takes issue with my contention that when we read the "Historical Notes" we move from a realist reading experience to a postmodernist one in which the conditions of interpretation (including the political aspect of epistemology) take centre stage (*Fear*). In an earlier reading of Atwood's novel,[4] I argue that we move from the conventional vitality of a fictional dialogue between author and reader to a more reflective contemplation on how stories are produced and received. In her reading, Rooke seeks to maintain the integrity of her personal relationship with Offred, whose "true" name, she argues, is June. By creatively replacing the patronymic "Offred" with a more conventional name, Rooke feels that she gives dignity and identity to the speaker--she suspends disbelief and gives authority to the signifier:

> the relationship into which I entered with the narrator (when I guessed her name) seemed unusually dependent on my suspension of disbelief; I felt that it was important for me to believe in her, in this woman who says 'I feel as if there's not much left of me; they [her husband and child] will slip through my arms, as if I'm made of smoke, as if I'm a mirage, fading before their eyes.' (*Fear* 180)

Ironically, as her phrasing implicitly acknowledges, Rooke's reading, a personal assertion of her faith in artistic truth and humanity (a realist's response), is not so much a matter of disbelief suspended as it is an epistemological leap of faith. Offred's self-description (as a "mirage, fading before [the reader's] eyes"), prophetic and "accurate" though it turns out to be, is met by Rooke with denial and defensive reading strategies.

Rooke offers her own summary of my alternative postmodernist reading:

> What Garrett-Petts has in mind when he suggests that Atwood *intends* the diminished vitality of the fictional dialogue is that the reader's 'focus on character' must (in the Brechtian manner) be replaced by a focus on politics, especially as they impinge on our own time. This is his interpretive imperative. What I would question, however, is the necessity of that choice. What I find particularly impressive about *The Handmaid's Tale* is that it causes me to respond powerfully (and often, as it seems, simultaneously) on both of the ontological planes. It forces the recognition that politics and 'character' go hand in hand. It reminds us that an empathic

> understanding of the reality of others is the cornerstone of a just society. (181-82)

I have no difficulty with Rooke's insistence that reading has to be, at least partially, a matter of choice--as long as we recognize that such choice is always affected by epistemology and culture. And we agree that one need not adopt the "interpretive imperative" of another. Just the same, as readers--especially if we happen to be readers with postmodernist and rhetorical orientations--we have an ethical responsibility to imbricate empathic reading with a public accounting of our private epistemology. We do not negotiate meaning in an ideological or an epistemological vacuum. If read from a rhetorical perspective, *The Handmaid's Tale* will not allow us to linger over, and empathize with, a fictional construct--at least not during our reading of the "Historical Notes." However engaging our experience with (and sympathy for) Offred may be, the important question is not "What happens to Offred?" but "What happens to us when we confront the social and psychological conditions of our own interpretation?" Critical reading is not, I would argue, some form of innocent practice or endless dress-rehearsal performed without the responsibility of public accountability; it is ostensibly personal (as Rooke insists), but that personal response implicates a set of beliefs that are thoroughly and necessarily political. To linger over the question of Offred's "real" name suggests an inability to confront (or comprehend) the possibility that character is, "in essence," a field of socially-constructed selves. If we grant that *The Handmaid's Tale* invites a postmodernist reading, then our first priority becomes one of understanding *our own* reality--of understanding how we compose our selves (and how we are "composed" by others). Rooke's sense that the "Historical Notes" cause her to respond on two ontological planes suggests a move toward a rhetorically aware reading. But any insight gained from her new double perspective remains subordinate to her belief in liberal humanist notions of character and reality.

Reading Ourselves

What we can agree upon wholeheartedly, however, is that *The Handmaid's Tale* heightens reader awareness about the reading process itself. It offers, I would argue, a narrative of reading strikingly similar to that detailed as a preferred pedagogical strategy by Haas and Flower. The key to Haas and Flower's model is the notion of metacognitive awareness: that a bottom-up preoccupation with decoding surface-level meaning must give way to a "top-down," highly self-conscious "re-reading" in which the reader theorizes the rhetorical situation and situates herself as a motivated participant in the construction of meaning. Before we can claim that we "know" what the text means, we need to inquire into the conditions of knowledge.

This rhetorical strategy, I should note, is hardly new; what Haas and Flower (and Atwood) add is a renewed focus on the significance of reading as a site for exploring how we understand and "see" our world. As Lorna Irvine has pointed out in *Sub/Version*, others, such as art historian John Berger, regard "self-consciousness about various 'ways of seeing' [as] a necessary approach to the interpretation of art" (5). Irvine herself sees the dual role of participant and observer as a characteristic quality of Canadian literature and women, arguing that to "teach the reading [the subversion] of covert stories seems . . . a major task of feminist theory" (13). And in "Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading," Patrocinio Schweickart concludes her article with a three-stage strategy that combines Haas and Flower's concern for awareness with Irvine's "double vision." Schweickart casts reading as a dialectic, "a matter of 'trying to connect' with the existence behind the text" (53). The dialectic has three moments:

> The first involves the recognition that genuine intersubjective communication demands the duality of reader and author (the subject of the work). Because reading removes the barrier

> between subject and object, the division takes place *within* the reader. (53)

At first, then, reading "induces a doubling of the reader's subjectivity" (53), with one aspect attributable to the author, and the other to the reader. The feeling here is that failure to equate reading with "intersubjective communication" inevitably leads back to realist notions of reading as a bottom-up decoding activity. The second moment of the dialectic is reached when the necessary fiction of authorial intention becomes recognizable as a projection of the reader's subjectivity--and thus when the reader is recognized as sharing a primary responsibility for co-creating the text. Finally, the third moment strikes the now familiar chord of metacognitive awareness: "In the feminist story [of reading]," says Schweickart, "the key to the problem [of keeping reading from being totally subjective] is the awareness of the double context of reading and writing" (53). The third moment involves an informed assessment of both rhetorical contexts, of the social forces which impinge upon the production and reception of meaning. What we achieve through such projection, introspection, and metacognitive awareness is an interpretation of two subjectivities, of two epistemological hypotheses that shape how we know the text.

Discussion of duality and double vision as a thematic focus in Atwood's work has become commonplace since the publication of Sherrill Grace's book-length study, *Violent Duality*. What Atwood seems to have created in *The Handmaid's Tale* is an imaginative space in which the reader encounters the double vision as both a thematic focus and an experiential condition of reading. In a recent article, for example, John Moss provides a revealing narrative description (almost a protocol) of his "subjective" response:

> Reading *The Handmaid's Tale* is in itself a moral experience. We do not learn through the novel that morality can be confusing. We are genuinely confused. What Atwood gives the reader to think about is often at odds with what the narrative demands we feel. We find ourselves within the text, unable to sort out the contraries. And outside the text we find ourselves reading. The relationship between reading, morality,

> and individual presence in the world is a major concern of the novel and, obviously, of the author whose personality informs the work, inhabits the text, and shares with us her deepest and most whimsical fears. ("Life/Story" 87)

Reflection on our roles as readers inside and outside the text, and upon the projected subjectivity of the author, seem connected to the initially disjunctive effect that many readers associate with reading the "Historical Notes."

Reading and Writing History

When reading the "Historical Notes," the reader's sudden shift in orientation is matched by an equally disturbing realignment of relative power: reading the "Tale," we assume a role of equal partnership as we participate with the narrator (at least imaginatively) in the construction of her story; suddenly, though, when the "Historical Notes" subsume and thus subvert Offred's narrative, the relative power positions of narrator and audience shift, both pragmatically and thematically. The status of Offred's "Tale" diminishes when it is effectively rewritten by the official discourse of History. As I indicated, such a reconstruction is disturbing for most readers of Atwood's novel. It is meant to be.

Consider Pieixoto's treatment of Offred's narrative:

> Strictly speaking, it [the "Tale"] was not a manuscript at all when first discovered, and bore no title. The superscription "The Handmaid's Tale" was appended to it by Professor Wade, partly in homage to the great Geoffrey Chaucer; but those of you who know Professor Wade informally, as I do, will understand when I say that I am sure all puns were intentional, particularly that having to do with the archaic vulgar signification of the word *tail*; that being, to some extent, the bone, as it were, of contention, in that phase of Gileadean society of which our saga treats. (*Laughter, applause.*) (282-83)

Professor Pieixoto, Knotly Wade and the Historical Association are clearly not what Offred had in mind as her implied audience. The whole tone of their response is wrong. Pieixoto's sophomoric, smutty puns and jokes at the expense of those women, like Offred, who endured the religious extremism of Gilead strike the reader as ominous signs that little has really changed: Offred is still a victim of an oppressive patriarchal world view. Worse still, Offred's narrative warning against moral dictatorship, dehumanization, and atrocity in the name of the oppressive Gileadean theocracy is summarily dismissed in an "editorial aside" by the official voice of History:

> If I may be permitted an editorial aside, allow me to say that in my opinion we must be cautious about passing moral judgement upon the Gileadeans. Surely we have learned by now that such judgements are of necessity culture-specific. Also, Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise, and was subject to factors from which we ourselves are happily more free. Our job is not to censure but to understand. (284)

By arbitrarily framing Offred's oral tale, and by treating her experiences as an artifact, the "Historical Notes" simultaneously diminish the vitality of the fictional "dialogue" and increase the reader's awareness of his or her own interpretive responsibilities. Implicitly we are reminded that, as members of an interpretive community, readers bring meaning to texts and thus influence the performance. Arnold Davidson sees the "Notes" as a metacritical commentary on scholarly reading practices, and asks the rhetorical question, "Do we, as scholars, contribute to the dehumanization of society by our own critical work, especially when, as according to the distinguished professor of the novel, 'our job is not to censure but to understand'?" ("Future Tense" 115). The question focuses squarely on the nature of knowledge and our ethical responsibility for the creation of knowledge. For the rhetorically aware reader, questions of epistemology and ethics are unavoidable.

When cultural anthropologists or folklorists, for example, fix an oral performance in print, when they transcribe narration into narrative, they change it. A recent discussion of methodology in folklore field research is appropriate here:

> Like butterflies, human behavior can serve the needs of science [and literature] only when it is preserved as "the remains" after the life and the moment are gone. Stories in a documentary key--stories framed by the expectations of pedagogy and academic inquiry--are at best simple reminders that each recorded text represents a once vital interaction. (Dolby-Stahl, "A Literary" 51)

The approach taken by the literary critic treating the experience of reading is not so dissimilar. The presence of the critical eye may change the nature of the "once vital" initial reading experience. Certainly, in Atwood's *Tale*, the proxy academic community of the "Historical Notes" presents academic inquiry at its "unself-conscious" worst.

Freedom From and Freedom To

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood is interested in promoting a very different, a very pragmatic, kind of interpretive strategy. The "Historical Notes" demonstrate how systems of discourse are synonymous with systems of power. Elsewhere Atwood notes that interpretation in general implicates systems of value and power:

> We are all organisms within environments, and we interpret what we read in the light of how we live and how we would like to live, which are almost never the same thing, at least for most novel readers. (*Second Words* 419)

The process of interpretation depends upon who we are and how we relate to our environment. That view informs the political theme of Atwood's novel and gives dramatic focus to many of the issues I have discussed thus far.

Atwood's novel (indeed all her novels) concerns power structures and how they work to confine and determine the individual's ability to communicate and interpret. Power determines freedom, or the absence of freedom; it is, according to Wayne Booth in "Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism," a matter of *freedom from* and *freedom to*:

> All the *freedom from* [external restraints and the power of others to control thought and actions] in the world will not free me *to* make an intellectual discovery or to paint a picture unless I have somehow freed myself *to* perform certain tasks. Such freedoms are gained only by those who surrender to disciplines and codes invented by others, giving up certain *freedoms from*. (47)

Paradoxically, total *freedom from* is no freedom at all; it is merely a condition of powerlessness. Consider Aunt Lydia's reductive analysis of freedom, an ideologically-bound interpretation offered as an instructive anodyne to the Handmaids and to a society supposedly dying of "too much choice" (24):

> There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. (24)

The Gileadean regime's version of freedom constitutes a political, deceptively seductive formula that effectively subverts the liberal humanist distinctions of thinkers such as Wayne Booth. The negotiated compromise characterized by Booth becomes not a limited ideological surrender in order to learn the code and discipline of society, but a complete surrender of all personal liberty. The absence of freedom, the subservience to a puritanical system of belief, is proffered by Aunt Lydia as its own reward. The true believer clears her mind: "What we prayed for," says Offred, "was emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled. . ." (182). Ironically, the luxury of "freedom" from entering the discourse of human events, a luxury shared by those who have (or who regard themselves as having) little place in the narrative of daily history, helps to prepare the way for the establishment of Gilead. Before the onset of the Gileadean regime, Offred chose not to participate, not to enter the narrative:

> We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. (53)

If there is a lesson here, it is that the freedom of living in "the gaps between the stories" (53) is illusory. Atwood's novel invokes the postmoderist notions of narrative, indeterminacy, and *aporia* and then reconsiders their aesthetic significance by subtly reminding her readers (by way of Offred's example) of their own political responsibilities: Offred's initial freedom from the narrative impedes her freedom to write, revise, and shape her own life story; one cannot withdraw from the discourse without serious consequences.

Despite Aunt Lydia's sophistry, learning and interpreting the language of the environment is a necessary first step toward *freedom to*. In a world where reading and writing have been outlawed, Offred's tale, her recorded interpretation of events surrounding the Early Gileadean Period, represents more than a documentary account; it is clear testimony of her refusal to surrender her freedom to interpret and communicate. Like the Handmaid who occupies the room before Offred's arrival, Offred communicates a message in defiance of political authority.

For Offred, the words *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*, scratched into the corner of her cupboard by her predecessor, offer a message to be interpreted. "It pleases me to ponder this message," she says. "It pleases me to think I'm communing with her, this unknown woman" (49). The words become a prayer, a distraction from the prayers and blessings that permeate the Commander's household. The words are also subversive, an act of rebellion against the will of the Republic. When Offred first encounters the mock-Latin phrase, it holds no referential meaning: the words cannot be read--not literally, at least. Offred discovers later that the "unknown woman," her predecessor, learned the phrase when she found it scribbled in the Commander's schoolboy primer. One commentator, Harriet Bergmann, claims that this discovery and the words' connection with the Commander diminish the text's power to comfort and communicate. Bergmann says that

> the piece of text *loses its status as message* and therefore its potential to comfort Offred. Not a message of sisterhood at all, it is, at least probably, a male text, in a language as debased as the photo of the Venus de Milo ["with a moustache and a black brassiere and armpit hair drawn clumsily on her" (175)]. ("Fishing" 849)

But while it is certainly true that the meaning of the words change for Offred, I'm not convinced that it "*loses its status as message*." Instead, the message of sisterhood would seem to gain significance. The issue is not really one of the words' literal translation, or of their contamination as a "male text": the words gain significance as Offred learns of their social function. Her knowledge of the text forges an intertextual link with all those (Handmaids or schoolboys) who seek to establish a rhetoric of resistance to authority. Offred enters "intertextually" into a subversive conversation. As Michèle Lacombe says of the message, the "notion of palimpsest . . . applies to the reading and writing of this phrase: [the Commander] is its immediate but not original male author, and his use of it has been reappropriated by the previous and current handmaids with subversive if ironic intent" ("The Writing" 13). The reading lesson Offred learns directly (and her audience learns indirectly) is not simply to translate (or decode from the "bottom up"), but to position oneself (to "compose" oneself) within the cultural conversation.

At first, Offred has only herself to compose: "I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech" (62). Language becomes both her refuge and a way to preserve sanity:

> I sit in the chair and think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in *charity*. It is French for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others.
>
> These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself. (104)

She interprets her world as one might solve a linguistic puzzle; like the message scratched in her closet, her world presents a "hieroglyph to which the key's been lost" (138). Rooke quite rightly points out that, for the reader, "'these facts' are indeed connected[,]" and that the "statement that they are *not* operates as an invitation to the reader to discern their connection . . ." and "to do a better job of interpretation . . ." (183-4). At this point in Offred's story, however, it is not the validity of interpretation that is important; it is the process, the act of keeping both her intellectual skills and her political will alive. Offred's plans to press a dried flower under her mattress, to "[l]eave it there, for the next woman, the one who comes after" (92) represents an act of self-expression that presupposes a "self" to express. Communication and social identity are inextricable. Like her condition, Offred's sense of self is not unique--and her symbolic reaching out to another, "the one who comes after," may be read as a gesture of sisterhood akin to the scratching of words in a cupboard.

To communicate is to hold power. Words like those on the petit-point "FAITH" (54) cushion, or contained in the lyrics of songs, "especially ones that use words like *free* . . . are considered [by the powers that be] too dangerous" (51). Only those with political power are singled out to enjoy the company of words: Aunt Lydia flaunts her prerogative to read during the district Salvaging by taking "an undue length of time to unfold and scan [a written notice,] rubbing [the handmaids'] noses in it . . . (258); the Commander's office is an "oasis of the forbidden" (129), filled with books--"[b]ooks and books and books, right out in plain view, no locks no boxes" (129; and Offred's forbidden evening visits with the Commander revolve around playing games of Scrabble. The language games further revitalize Offred's "nearly forgotten" (145) link to her past self and "customs that had long before passed out of the world . . ." (145). A pen between her fingers " is sensuous, alive almost, [she] can feel its power, the power of words it contains" (174). As Offred's power over language increases, so too does her sense of social identity and purpose.

The impulse to communicate symbolically via a dried flower, or the silent semaphore of "infinitesimal nods" (265) among the Handmaids, or the exchange of passwords among the resistance movement, or the thirty tape cassettes that constitute Offred's narrative--each act affirms the existence of the collective will to resist: "We show each other we are known, at least to someone, we still exist" (265). The alternative, an emptying of self and an obliteration of personality, suggests the truly insidious nature of *freedom from*. Janine, the frightened, obedient Handmaid, exemplifies one who withdraws from all attempts to communicate and interpret. After the Particicution, a public execution, Janine has a smear of blood across her face and a clump of blond hair in her hand. The brutal murder of a Guardian, a murder in which she was an active participant, makes no discernible impact upon her. "You have a nice day," (263) she says, echoing an insipid, empty phrase that, given the context, seems all the more meaningless. Janine has no message to communicate, no socially aware consciousness left to express. "[S]he's let go, totally now, she's in free fall," says the narrator, "[S]he's in withdrawal" (263). Janine enjoys freedom from all care and responsibility; she is an empty vessel to be filled and used by the Republic. Similarly, following Ofglen's suicide, the narrator feels a sudden surge of submission. Wishing she were safe from discovery now that Ofglen is dead, she contemplates emptying herself, becoming "a chalice. I'll give up Nick, I'll forget about the others, I'll stop complaining. I'll accept my lot" (268). Although such thoughts are only momentary, "for the first time" she feels "their [the regime's] true power" (268). The power of the regime lies not in its authority but in its ability to usurp a person's *freedom to*. What is at stake here, if I interpret Atwood correctly, is the freedom of self-expression: Gilead is interested in more than sociopolitical power through the control of information and the dissemination of the party line; the genius of the Gileadean power structure lies in its ability to replace personal experience and awareness with a master narrative that makes personal self-expression redundant.

In the Republic of Gilead, the "true believer" is one who no longer has any beliefs--if we take the word belief to imply a volitional act. To write a novel, or to compose a taped message for future generations, celebrates a belief in the power of one's personal consciousness to communicate beyond the self and to define itself as something "beyond the self"; it is a reaching out to an other. As the narrator puts it, "By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being" (251) "Belief" is, in essence, an assertion of epistemology; in this case, it is a creative impulse that rejects the negation of an historically and socially situated self and denies the absence of possible audiences. Narration and appropriate audience response are cast as political acts of self-preservation.

Self, Audience, and Narrative

My use of the term "self-expression" thus far has been specific to the novel's political theme. But here and elsewhere Atwood's concern for self-expression goes beyond simple concern for freedom of speech. If we are to understand fully the implications of self-expression in *The Handmaid's Tale*, we must come to terms with Atwood's concept of self, for the liberal humanist ideal of an autonomous self seems at odds with postmodern and rhetorical notions of the self as socially constructed. One way of coming to terms with this key concept is to insert the interpretation of the *Tale* into Atwood's public discourse on writing and reading.

In a speech entitled "End to Audience," Atwood offers her most extensive public statement on self, audience, and narrative--and, in the process, anticipates the central political theme dramatized in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the speech, Atwood is quick to remind us that "writing [or storytelling] is considerably more and other than mere self-expression" ("End" 421). Any act of communication establishes a necessary and often intimate rapport with an audience--and it is through the process of interaction between narrator and audience that "self" is constructed:

> To think of writing . . . is to think of a verb. Writing itself is a process, an activity which moves in time and through time, and it is self-less . . . . [W]riting is self-less in the same way that competition skiing is, or making love. How can you take part intensely in such an involving polyaesthetic activity and still be thinking about yourself? ("End" 422)

Atwood is speaking about the role of the author in general; nonetheless, her discussion of self sheds considerable light on the role of narrator and audience in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The creative self, for Atwood, is apparently meaningless--or at least little more than a convenient label--outside the context of the act of creation:

> The person who wrote the poem I seem to remember composing yesterday no longer exists, and it's merely out of courtesy to librarians that we put everything with the word *Shakespeare* on the title page into the card file together. Or it would be merely a courtesy, were it not for the fact that each piece of writing changes the writer . . . . Shakespeare, whoever he was, was also the only creature who went through the experience of writing those plays, one after another after another. ("End" 423)

Compare this conception of the self with Rooke's "insistent claim that the heroine's name [in *The Handmaid's Tale*] is June . . . " and that "the name is important because the public world that Atwood would have us enter and interpret is one that can (if we remain quiescent) efface us as private individuals" (194). Rooke's position resonates with humanist authority, and her rhetoric of "individuality" bespeaks heart-felt commitment. Nonetheless, her sentiments run contrary to the rhetoric of reading (and writing) professed and dramatized by Atwood.

Identity for an artist such as Atwood seems contingent upon and defined during the act of composition. At first glance there is little here to distinguish this position from that taken by many postmodernist authors. But, for Atwood, self-expression alone is not enough. The storyteller must invoke an audience, believing that the audience will respond--is capable of responding: "the process of reading is part of the process of writing, the necessary completion without which writing can hardly be said to exist" ("End" 423). Certainly, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the narrator comes very close to saying that, without the process of narration and the projection of a conjectural audience, she would cease to exist. The self is created and recreated in the process of communicating with an audience; writing and interpretive response are reflective, recursive activities, mutually dependent. The kind of reader-response described here is not one of simple participation or sympathy; for Atwood, reading would seem a matter of fierce interpretation. The reader's role is one of considerable responsibility. Not surprisingly, Atwood's sense of the responsibilities between writer and reader causes her to restrict the notion of self-expression:

> [writing] is not "expressing yourself." It is opening yourself, discarding your self, so that language and the world may be evoked through you. *Evocation* is quite different from *expression*. Because we are so fixated on the latter, we forget that writing also does the former. ("End" 425)

Atwood is stressing the rhetorical responsibility of a writer both to express intention and to evoke audience response. "Maybe a writer *expresses*," she adds, " but *evocation*, calling up, is what the writing does for the reader" ("End" 425). Reciprocally, "calling up" a rhetorically responsible response is what the reading does for the writer. As I have indicated, the notion of creating *with* an audience goes to the very heart of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

In "Offred," Atwood creates the objective correlative of her novel's theme: a narrator whose very existence depends upon the construction and reconstruction of her narrative. Offred is not the stuff of realist fiction, for we get no lasting sense that she exists, or that she could exist, apart from her tale. But neither is she an appositive to the more radical postmodernist treatment of character: for some postmodernist authors, realistic characters betray a false adherence to the conventions of mimesis; for Atwood, character is merely a functional means to a rhetorical end. Offred exists solely as an "illocutionary act"--performed (created) *in* speaking. Offred understands her self in terms of reconstructed memories of earlier narratives, like mirrors facing mirrors. The reader of Atwood's novel reconstructs the narrative but not the narrator. As the distancing effect of the "Historical Notes" ensures, by the end of the novel Offred dissolves into the background of thematic patterns and image clusters, leaving the reader to ponder the ontological status of narrative and narration. Focus on character is relegated, of necessity, to the margins of attention.

We have a clear sense in *The Handmaid's Tale* that Offred's struggle to discover her own identity, her sense of self in the abstract, is contingent upon her ability to find an audience for her story. As Atwood's remarks on the dialectical importance of "evocation" suggest, the definition of self takes place only within the context of the communication process. When Atwood speaks of self, then, she has in mind a shifting point of focus, created and recreated every time it communicates.[5] Even when the audience is physically absent (as is the case in Offred's narrative) the narrator internalizes a sense of audience and becomes engaged in a dialogue with a host of audiences--multiple projected selves among which the initial self-expressive impulse is simply a catalyst. The frequent self-conscious but muted metafictional intrusions that punctuate Offred's narrative dramatize this internal dialogue and broaden the political theme: ultimately it is not the particulars of Offred's political struggle or "character" that claim importance; what is important is the act of bearing witness for, and believing in the possibility of, a future audience capable of a rhetorically aware response.

Atwood's Postmodernism: Entering the Discourse

What we have been looking at throughout this chapter is the effect of rhetorical intention on artistic form. Atwood is an author of pronounced moral and didactic sensibilities working within a predominantly modernist and postmodernist discourse. Like her protagonist, the author must enter the discourse, surrender herself to "codes invented by others" in order to reinsert them into her own narrative. Rather than seeking to argue against (or ignore) the developing "narrative" of Canadian postmodernist authors, Atwood chooses to tap into the narrative and establish an integrated relationship with her audience; in the process she offers her readers a reading experience subtly different from that offered by other postmodernists such as Bowering and Kroetsch. The postmodernist author is thought to toy with his reader through a medium of expression that is antagonistic toward realist interpretative practices and offers, in its place, a playful reading, to be enjoyed at the moment of perception. Bowering, remember, speaks often about drawing "the reader's attention to the surface" (*Mask* 120) of literature, to "sharp imagery & language that is interesting prior to reference, or interesting because the reference is so difficult to ascertain" (114). Bowering's concern, as I understand it, is twofold: that "the literal prose . . . be more interesting & [that] the reader . . . be called upon to actualize the work" (120). These interests do not compromise his work's political intent. It is simply that Bowering wishes his readers to linger over the sounds and shapes of the words as they are being read. Accordingly, in an essay such as "The Painted Window," when he argues that postmodernist reading involves a suspension of critical judgment and an engagement in the surface-level delights of language, he is not counselling against interpretation. He is counselling against conventional realist reading, which overlooks more than it sees. Atwood, on the other hand, is unambiguous on this issue: she sees interpretation as a political imperative; she wants her reader aware of the significant correspondence between reading a work of fiction and making sense out of life. Neither reading nor life can ever be considered ideologically or epistemologically innocent--and every act of reading constitutes an act of self-definition in "conversation" with author, text, and context.

In the final analysis, flirtation with the extreme postmodern condition of total participation in an indeterminate semiotic landscape is anathema to Atwood. "Perspective is necessary," (135) says Offred; and that is what Atwood gives her readers, the "illusion of depth, created by a frame, the arrangement of shapes on a flat surface" (135) that makes interpretation possible. The extreme postmodernist alternative traps the uninitiated reader, like Offred, in a "bottom-up," primary reading experience that precedes interpretation,

> your face squashed against a wall, everything a huge foreground, of details, close-ups . . . a diagram of futility, crisscrossed with tiny roads that lead nowhere. (135)

That Atwood is ethically and aesthetically concerned with questions of perspective seems obvious: her novels and short stories are full of examples of characters fixated by surfaces, trapped into a close-up view of reality ostensibly unmediated by a theoretical perspective. Joan Foster, in *Lady Oracle*, writes her gothic novels "with [her] eyes closed" (131), not wishing to take responsibility for what she commits to paper; she is someone who finds it "so hard to read theories" (212), and yet, ironically, she "always found other people's versions of reality very influential" (161). Similarly, Sarah in "The Resplendent Quetzel" does not believe in reading about places before visiting on vacation, and her story dramatizes how prior knowledge affects what we see (or don't see). And, to take one more example, Rennie Wilford laments early in *Bodily Harm*, "I see into the present, that's all. Surfaces. There's not a whole lot to it" (26); only later does Rennie's superficial vision of life give way, when her world is turned "inside out" and she discovers that there is no refuge from political commitment, from living life "in depth."[6] The postmodern condition of pre-critical perception does not hold the attraction for Atwood that it does for Bowering: to "live in the moment," says Offred--and Atwood--"is not where I want to be" (135). Atwood's characters and readers learn to recognize the limitations of the immediate moment and to become aware that perception depends upon perspective.

Atwood's novel at once embraces the current Canadian postmodernist aesthetic--in particular, the theory that life, like the novel that seeks to represent life, is shaped by a narrative process--and counsels against postmodernism's perceived apolitical tendencies. It is only through narration, she implies, through communicating our story to others, that we establish individual and collective identities. Where some contemporary authors seek to divorce theory from everyday life, Atwood pushes toward a reconciliation, a linking of theory to experience, of ideas to life.[7] To eschew interpretation and to retreat into an exclusive focus on the process of narration means risking the rhetorical distance needed to understand who we are and how we relate to the world around us. For some postmodernists, the medium may be regarded as the message, but as Atwood makes clear, it is not the whole story.

NOTES

[1] A version of this chapter has been published as "Reading, Writing, and the Postmodern Condition: Interpreting Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Open Letter* 7.1 (1988): 74-92.

[2] As Walter J. Ong notes, a "reader has to play the role in which the author has cast him, which seldom coincides with his role in the rest of actual life" ("The Writer's Audience" 12).

[3] See John Searle's *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*; also see J.L. Austin's *How To Do Things With Words*.

[4] See my "Reading, Writing, and the Postmodern Condition."

[5] In her study on Atwood, Sherrill Grace notes that "Atwood conceives of the self not as an individual ego, defining itself against its surroundings, but as a place or entity co-extensive with its environment" (*Violent Duality* 2). My discussion treats self more as an extension of the interaction between narrator and audience than an extension of the physical environment.

[6] David Lucking offers a detailed discussion of depths and surfaces in Atwood's *Bodily Harm*. See "In Pursuit of the Faceless Stranger: Depths and Surfaces in Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm*."

[7] Citing a number of feminist writers (including Nancy Hartsock, Elaine Showalter, and Gracie Lyons), Chris Bullock calls this tendency toward wholeness typical of a "female mode", of writing:

> This female mode is indirect, informal, additive; it is non-adversarial and non-combative; it attempts to achieve an integrated and supportive relationship with its audience . . . . ("Changing the Context" 2)

CHAPTER SIX

Robert Kroetsch's Frozen Words: Reading Postmodernism in a Northern Climate

In the prose narratives of Robert Kroetsch, particularly in *What the Crow Said*, the processes of storytelling and reading are juxtaposed in an ironic counterpoint that, rather than "lock[ing] up the form" (Kroetsch, *What* 16) of the story, keeps the story in motion, keeps it a matter of narration rather than of narrative. As I argued earlier, Kroetsch's rhetoric makes a consistent appeal to metaphors of orality, invoking a world of oral discourse that everywhere struggles against the tyranny of print.

The opening chapters of *What the Crow Said* present yet another character struggling to produce a narrative, a story in which the order of events and their historical accuracy lose conventional relevance and become rather the by-products of the fictional process. Gus Liebhaber, chief author and printer of the *Big Indian Signal*, is introduced as "playing pocket pool" and remembering the future:

> And Liebhaber, then, remembered: Martin Lang was going to die during the night. He started to set the story, slightly in advance of the event; that too was simple enough. Time was something of a mystery to Liebhaber. (15)

Liebhaber's temporal confusion establishes an ostensibly incoherent grammar of motives and actions in which the only stabilizing element, at least in realist terms, is a latent reverence for the physicality of language. Looking for the right words to form Martin Lang's premature obituary notice, Liebhaber thinks of Vera Lang's "crabbed, tight, perfect handwriting on the page of scribbler paper" (17). Words are tactile: "He wanted to look [for words] with his fingers, not with his head" (17). But, approaching the "deadline" (16) for the story of a death yet to occur, Liebhaber finds himself unable to compose the story:

> He couldn't finish the story; he couldn't complete the page and add the quoins, check the footstick, the sidestick, lock up the form . . . (16)

Stories cannot be so easily framed by the written word. In the following chapter, Tiddy Lang reads the front page of the newspaper; she studies "the blank space, the absence of words, at the bottom of the right-hand column. She read the space for a long time before she folded the paper . . . (27).

The white space, "the absence of words" that implies an act of omission, or of indirect communication--this, as Kroetsch says in conversation with Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, is the text that invites readers to become creatively involved in the construction of narrative. Blank space, too, can be "read," once we learn how. "When *What the Crow Said* first came out," relates Kroetsch, "two very good readers told me, the book's way too short. They wanted the elaboration visible in front of their eyes; whereas I knew after a quarter of a page that they really knew the story, you see?" (*Labyrinths* 162). As readers we encounter our own blank spaces, which we may regard as potentially meaningful or simply meaningless. In a similar vein, Kroetsch claims that "finally what makes a book resonate is what a reader knows even though he isn't quite aware of it" (*Labyrinths* 38). Like Bowering and Atwood, Kroetsch implies that postmodernist narratives are not products that can be objectively analyzed but are processes whose very existence depends upon collaboration between writer and reader. The reader brings meaning to the text; and "I want the ultimate reader to have that obligation, to sense that weight" (*Labyrinths* 38), says Kroetsch.

Of Rhetoric and Politics

When Kroetsch talks about reading, when he theorizes, his position sounds of a piece with the rhetoric informing the recent work of Bowering and Atwood. Whether they conceptualize reading in terms of a playful conversation or an intimate dialogue, all three writers seem intent on treating reading as an interactive process; and, further, they seem intent on teaching reading strategies that challenge traditional assumptions regarding the authority of the text. Bowering employs the metaphors of reading as conversation and accident; Atwood establishes a rhetoric in which the reader is encouraged to read both narrative and metanarrative, to read beneath the page; and Kroetsch, as I shall show, regards reading the text as a process analogous to a spring thaw wherein frozen words are set free by the warmth of human interaction. Of the three, Atwood is the most obviously political. That is, her focus on the politics of perception and interpretation offers an overt (thematized) critique of how discourse exerts power over both individual and social histories. Bowering's critique is perhaps more subtle, but he too writes "historical" narratives about conquest and resistance to imported tradition; and he, like Atwood, initiates a double vision which enables an ongoing dialectical struggle between conventions of realism and postmodernism (or what Bowering calls "post-realism"). Both authors remain committed to teaching their audiences a rhetoric of reading that promises participation in, and responsibility for, the creation of meaning.

When we turn to Kroetsch's work, however, especially to a text such as *What the Crow Said*, the question of rhetorical purpose seems particularly crucial. The current "reading" sees the novel as a theoretically sophisticated white elephant. While commentators acknowledge *What the Crow Said*'s place as a logical narrative conclusion to Kroetsch's theoretical and aesthetic inquiries, they deny the book more than "theoretical" interest and significance. *What the Crow Said* has been criticized roundly for its absence of humour, its abandonment of realist reference points, its lack of humanity, and its rhetorical distance from daily life. Lecker argues that, by valorizing the oral over the written, and by privileging a decidedly postmodern aesthetic over prevailing realist practice, Kroetsch cuts off himself (and his readers) from any socially relevant discourse:

> the particularities of daily life and all sense of identifiable ritual are abandoned in the search for what is purely larger than life, for a rendition that is so fantastic that it in no way relates to the environment and culture Kroetsch hoped to mythologize. (99)

According to such commentary, neither the politics of expression nor the politics of reading seem at issue. Indeed, most critics to date have avoided the whole issue of the novel's political and social relevance, preferring to see it as a literary oddity or a failed experiment, "a case of form exploding itself" (Thomas 116). Lecker, for example, reads *What the Crow Said* in terms of an aesthetic of desire, "an erotic textual metaphor: the story that is not known is the story we desire to know" (104). "[T]o read *Crow*," says Lecker, "we must enter into its spirit of play and realize that it is possible to read without an end or message in mind" (105). Such reading evidently holds little appeal for Lecker, who declares *Crow* "Kroetsch's weakest novel" (150).

One notable exception to this chorus of critical complaint is Stephen Slemon's recent article, "Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse," where he links Kroetsch's postmodernist narrative strategies to the political purposes of post-colonial discourse. Both discourses, says Slemon, make similar demands upon the reader: both ask the reader to confront and accommodate writing informed by two opposed epistemologies: "the binary opposition between control in one dimension and incompetence or bewilderment in the other reflects the dialectic operative in post-colonial cultures between inherited, sure, and constraining codes of imperial order and the imagined, precarious, and liberating codes of post-colonial 'original relations'" (20). The mode of narration "requires the reader to read the novel in a dialectical manner, forestalling the collapse of either one of the two narrational modes into the other, but recognizing the erosion in massive and totalizing system that the dialectic effects in each" (20). Accordingly, the "texts thus demand a kind of reading process in which the imagination becomes stimulated into summoning into being new and liberating 'codes of recognition'" that Slemon sees as "characteristic of post-colonial magic realist texts" (20). Slemon seems to assume that these "codes of recognition" constitute a latent property of the text, and thus he never explores the process by which "the imagination" summons new modes of interpretation into being. Nonetheless, by asserting an interpretive schema (one based on his sense of how magic realist and post-colonial writing work), he goes some distance toward answering the charge that there is nothing at stake in reading *What the Crow Said.*

Reading (in) the World

Robert Wilson is surely right when he sees *What the Crow Said* as confronting the reader with two central questions: the first involves Kroetsch's vision of Albertan reality, and the second asks whether Kroetsch's vision reveals "anything that counts, that demands to be taken seriously" (40). Understanding Kroetsch's "vision" of reality, his epistemology, is, as I have argued at length, crucial to understanding any rhetoric of reading. But it is the answer to the second question, claims Wilson, "brings the novel into significant focus" (40); it is the same question, of course, that we raised in relation to Bowering's fiction. To take either Bowering or Kroetsch seriously we need to work out the word/world relationship, to understand the connections that reach beyond the exclusively literary. As the readings of Lecker and Peter Thomas suggest, and as Wilson argues, Kroetsch's seriousness of purpose remains an open question. But Wilson's conclusion that readers are required "to *leap* from the interpretation of the fiction to its putative reference" (40; emphasis added) seems problematic. The notion of leaping from word to world implies a gulf between text and context that no postmodern rhetoric of reading can long sustain. Similarly the current (moderating) critical view of Kroetsch as a "borderman" (Lecker 10) straddling the polarities of art and life, text and context, imposes a realist paradigm that sees Kroetsch's writing as little more than an object lesson in the dangers of over-reaching commonsense boundaries. For the realist critic, Kroetsch's literary experiment represents a failed pursuit offering readers a sophistic rehearsal of paradox, duplicity, and contradictory purposes. The argument goes this way: Kroetsch wants to uninvent the world, to free himself and his readers from Old World versions of reality, but he still needs a common language and a common frame of reference if he is going to tell his story; Kroetsch is tempted by the silence of a preliterate state of being, but, as an artist, he must speak out; Kroetsch is committed to an art of process in which his readers collaborate in the creation of meaning, but print fixes the experience in a static and thus inauthentic form which undermines the author's intent. Kroetsch, thus depicted, cannot escape reality, and neither can his readers. Lecker argues that to enter into the process as co-creator of meaning "the reader must, like Kroetsch, become a borderman dodging through a hall of mirrors. He must come to appreciate the two-faced artist as shaman, and as sham" (12). And presumably, like Kroetsch, the reader will end up confounded by paradox, locked into a philosophical "double bind" (20), and "caught between extremes" (21). Lecker's metaphors of bondage and capture help characterize Kroetsch as an author trapped in the discourse of double-talk.

Lecker's difficulty in seeing beyond the play of paradox has much in common with Hutcheon's inability to see postmodernism as anything other than pre-paradigmatic, hopelessly tethered to the discourse of paradox, and thus forever self-consciously marginal. Novels such as *What the Crow Said* do explore the paradoxical, but to characterize Kroetsch as an author confounded by the inadequacy of his world view--as someone endlessly rehearsing questions without answers--seems a gross misreading of Kroetsch's work and of Canadian postmodernism generally. What is missing here in Lecker's reading is a serious consideration of Kroetsch's alternative paradigm. A "border" need not define an endless confrontation of binaries, for a border also suggests a meeting place, a text perhaps, where self and other, text and context, converge or, in Kroetsch's terms, converse.

Kroetsch offers his own gloss on text and context in *Labyrinths of Voice*:

> I think we do go back from a text to a context. Let's take something as simple as riddles. Playing with riddles often sounds as [if it] is a purely verbal game. And yet if we move the slightest bit outside the riddle itself to the context in which it is embedded, it starts to talk about social conditions, human conditions, and to possess philosophical implications. You can start to read a riddle as a great insight into human uncertainty, self-deception and so forth. And I suppose the riddle is basic to many poems, and to many novels . . . . I guess I am always uneasy when I hear critics saying literature is all game because it's a refusal of certain of the materials that are operating. It's almost the reverse of the naive notions that we had about Realism and Naturalism eighty years ago. (81-82)

Kroetsch sees the distance between text and context as a slight move rather than as a leap. In rhetorical terms, the movement between text and context establishes the enabling circumstance for reading, involving the social, human, and philosophical, as it must if we are to view reading as more than either an absurdist pursuit or a mechanical exercise in decoding. We can interpret the novel as "an artefact, a verbal construction that is essentially autonomous" (Wilson 47), but to do so tends to ignore the role of readers and reading, and thus constitutes "a refusal of certain of the materials that are operating."

And what of *The Crow Journals*, that self-reflexive journal written during the writing of *What the Crow Said*? Though seldom cited by critics of the novel, the journal's presence gives still further evidence that *What the Crow Said* is anything but a self-sufficient artifact somehow separate (or separable) from the narrative of personal, political, and cultural concerns that influence Kroetsch and his readers. In the journals, Kroetsch reflects on how the figure of Liebhaber and the town of Big Indian are tied to his "own (rural?) experience" (11), to his boyhood memories of "the little town of Rosalind" (20) Alberta; his passion for "breaking forms" and his stance "[a]gainst a humanism that coerces" (15); his concern for Canadian cultural values and creative processes: "In Canada: do we have polis?" he asks. "Has the Canadian city been invented? Or are the rural values still dominant, and with those values the stories, the memories, that carry them?" (17). Perhaps most telling is his enduring fascination with the "method" of Canadian oral culture, its patterns and the story those patterns tell: he speaks of "a belief in the text beneath the text" and his interest in understanding "the complexities and patterns beneath the formulaic speech" (55).

Kroetsch learned early in life that we help create our own narratives, that we live "in the midst of *story* material" (*Treachery* 4). Accordingly, the separation of word from world "is surely a problem for people who seldom see images of themselves in literature or art: we fail to recognize the connection between art and life. We separate the two fatally" (4). The connection, though, does not come through an appeal to realism, for the stories that realists tell employ perceptual models that frame Canadian experience in imported history, language, ideology. "Arrest those men, officer, we were framed," (15), says Kroetsch. Instead, like Bowering and Atwood, he conceptualizes text and context as a conversational model, a dialogue. In *The Lovely Treachery of Words* he declares:

> There are these two sides to language: *langue* and *parole*. *Langue* is the great-given, the sum total of words and grammar and literature and concluded speech. *Parole* is what one of us says, the uniqueness of the speaking (writing) person. If you are unlucky, the great-given swamps you, and even when you

> speak, you are silent. If you are incredibly lucky, and if you work your ass off, the great-given sounds, not over, but *in* your unique speaking. If that happens, then you have found a Voice. (19)

We are "perforce bilingual," and our unique speaking, when achieved through conscious effort, always implicates a dialogue with the great-given.

The great-given, as Kroetsch seems eminently aware, is itself neither readily available for objective contemplation nor inherently monologic. When we hear Kroetsch speaking, therefore, we should not be overly perplexed by the variety of positions taken and epistemologies explored. Unlike the realist seeking universal truth, says Kroetsch, "the Postmodernist is more tempted by those momentary insights that spring up here and there" (*Labyrinths* 112). Rather than hiding or ignoring possible contradictions, Kroetsch celebrates the recognition of frame conflict in much the same way that Bowering celebrates the accidental: as evidence of the power of self-reflection (of theory) to take us beyond the impasse of conventional ways of seeing and understanding. To admit contradiction, however, is not to reject epistemological coherence, for Kroetsch maintains an abiding belief in the power of narrative to create shared realities. Reality is a rhetorical phenomenon; and writing and reading are the heuristics through which we attempt to understand our relationship to that phenomenon. The proper subject of exploration thus becomes, as E.D. Blodgett proposes for the study of the literary institution in Canada generally, "an exploration of a certain kind of consciousness that is in the process of becoming conscious of itself and how it operates . . ." ("Afterword" 175-76). Only a reader open to the possibilities of such an exploration can fully appreciate Kroetsch's writing.

If read from a realist perspective, Kroetsch's novels threaten to embroil the reader in an engaging but ultimately trivial pursuit, round and round in the hermeneutic circle game. As John Moss would have it, we remain trapped inside the reconstruction of a deconstructed universe ("Himmler's" 252). Breaking old habits of reading is no easy task and, as often as not, the way reading is taught in universities tends to preclude a fair hearing for Kroetsch's work. "The current threat to the literary text," says Kroetsch is "the critic as theologian who cannot permit deviation from the right reading. The critic who cannot allow that the work of art *acts out* just this--the play of possible meanings. . . . The teacher who cannot offer the occasion, but rather the end" (Kroetsch and Bessai 208). Critical theory and novels that provoke reflection upon critical theory share a history of resistance in the English-Canadian academy (Murray, "Resistance"). Balachandra Rajan describes the current response to theory in terms that help explain the "resistance" of critical readers to works such as *What the Crow Said*:

> Critical theory tends to regard the text not as a terminus but as a means of access to other understandings with which the text must be brought into relationship. The proposition that the text is a terminus, and that serving the text is the encompassing objective of the scholarly effort, has been instilled into us by more than a generation of new critical practice. To question it is to throw open the very teaching of literature and the departmental programs that have been built around stubborn assumptions about how literature is to be taught. (154-155)

Like the subject of critical theory, postmodern narrative seeking to "educate" its readers "may not be welcome in an academy not as yet ready to reflect on its assumptions" (Rajan 155). But as a recent article on *What the Crow Said* points out, the need to reflect upon our processes of interpretation should be hard to avoid when reading a novel in which the struggle with meaning poses a central concern for reader, writer, and the characters as well (Wall 90).

The Temptation of Meaning

Kroetsch's notion of novel writing as his "own personal struggle with the temptation of meaning" (*Labyrinths* 15), a struggle he shares with his readers, presents an illuminating variant of the struggle for self-definition through narrative dramatized by Bowering and Atwood. A "struggle with the temptation of meaning" does not describe a retreat from meaning, but rather a redefinition of meaning: exegesis gives way to self-discovery and a personal understanding of the processes by which meaning is made. Kroetsch teaches us that the "personal" element in narrative is not simply marked by the first-person voice: narration is always personal, and the personal is a phenomenon of the narrative act. As Kroetsch explains it, there "is a self . . . we need more words here . . . but it's not something that we can lift out of context. I really think that I don't exist, I don't have an identity in that conventional sense" (*Labyrinths* 194). Similarly *What the Crow Said* cannot be said to exist "out of context." Ironically, although Kroetsch's novel has less to say (directly) about reading than either Bowering's or Atwood's novels, the whole question of critical reading is more alive in *What the Crow Said* than in any other Canadian narrative. To read the novel we need to reflect seriously upon the process of reading and the epistemologies of postmodern response.

For readers, the "personal struggle with the temptation of meaning" does not involve (cannot involve) a retreat from meaning; it does suggest, rather, that no reading can ever capture absolutely the meaning of a text. In this sense, reading remains a struggle, but always a struggle *toward* meaning, and thus, in contrast to what Lecker and Thomas believe, an affirmation of our continuing search for meaning in novels and in life. Like Bowering and Atwood, Kroetsch resists the temptation of imposing meaning, of freezing the "truth" of a text into a single reading. Meaning is not a product, but a process one must enter into and struggle with. And critical response to the novel, with its notable failure to pin down Kroetsch's meaning, helps focus the central question of reading: the interesting feature of published readings becomes, then, not simply their interpretations *per se*, but their struggle toward interpretation.

Once again, I am not saying or advocating that readers do not or should not interpret the novel's meaning and share the resulting interpretations. I am suggesting that *What the Crow Said* presents, in Kroetsch's words, "the text not as artifact but as enabling act" (Kroetsch and Bessai 208). Such a text "enables" us to reflect upon meaning as a process rather than as a product. As Kathleen Wall argues, in the most rhetorically aware discussion of the novel to date, "Kroetsch's text ultimately *means* not to expect/impose/attribute meaning (carelessly?) . . . . *What the Crow Said* might also be said to express the exuberance of language, narrative, and myth that results not in meaninglessness, but in manymeaning" (103). From the extreme realist perspective, one looking for a single, objectively verifiable meaning, the prospect of "manymeaning" evokes images of infinite regress and interpretive chaos. Meaninglessness and meaningfullness seem in danger of becoming interchangeable terms. But Wall's parenthetical caveat, phrased as a question, brings us back to the problem of the rhetoric and ethics of interpretation: we have no option but to impose meaning (we bring meaning to texts); if we are to read "carefully," however, we need to acknowledge our readings as advocated realities. That is, reading and readings need to be regarded as rhetorical acts involving but not subject to the written text. Reading, thus conceived, becomes a matter of rhetoric, not poetics; and any attempt to attribute meaning to structures found exclusively *in* the text becomes immediately suspect, or at least at odds with the postmodernist epistemology to which Kroetsch subscribes.

Reading as Weather Report

Though he is no realist, Kroetsch remains a writer concerned about including "the hard core of detail" (*Crow Journals* 11) born of the Canadian experience. In "Contemporary Standards in the Canadian Novel," Kroetsch sketches a brief narrative suggesting how the reading process itself explains the development of our national literature. The novel, he argues, "demands of us an exact measuring and an exact response. We must, each morning, free ourselves from sleep and into perception. The act of perceiving what is actually there is possibly the most difficult act of all--because we come to it with memories and expectations" (40). The echoes of Margaret Avison's "Snow" (and Margaret Atwood's *Survival*), calling for a radical mode of active perception--"a jail-break/and recreation"--sound a didactic chord appropriate for Kroetsch's rhetorical purpose: to shake up our comfortable modes of perception.[1] Kroetsch's metaphor of liberation from sleep argues that the traditional narrative of Canadian criticism represents institutional sleep-walking rather than "exact response":

> The paradigms established by other literatures are immensely satisfying to many of our readers, to tenured professors, and to book reviewers who wish to write a review without reading the book. (40)

What these readers need to help them see is theory, for, like writers in Canada who find themselves blocked, "the problem is often . . . rooted in an insufficiency of theory. They have come to the end of what they've picked up unconsciously, and they don't know how to break through to a new plateau." "I swear," says Kroetsch, "it's theory that would help them out" (Schellenberg, "Writer Writing" 24).

The novel "is a kind of weather report . . . a matter of here and now, of time and place" ("Contemporary" 40); and the implication seems to be that only unwary (or unscrupulous) readers would view Canadian literature through a filter of borrowed preconceptions. As Kroetsch notes with evident approval, to "a handful of serious critics and writers--and to a growing audience--the paradigms of other literatures patently and blatantly don't enable us to respond to our weather" (40).

Talk of weather, the here and now, and of a concern for detail sounds all rather traditional, and not at all the kind of thing one might expect from someone frequently characterized as wishing either to separate art from life or to teach his audience to read without an end or message in mind. Where Kroetsch differs from the tradition of prairie realism discussed in chapter 3, however, is in his insistence that reality is not objectively available for contemplation. If the fiction makes us real, then reality, and our experience of reality, becomes dependent upon the stories we tell about it. Thus, to understand the "reality" of Canadian prairie life, the artist is obliged to explore in detail the processes of storytelling and audience reception. *What the Crow Said* is just such an exploration. To respond to our "weather," Kroetsch implies that we need a spring thaw to break the conservative critical "freeze-up."

Kroetsch begins his travel book, *Alberta*, with the observation that "[s]pring is not seen, but heard, in Alberta" (2), and the privileging of the oral over the visual continues as an important element of his narrative in *What the Crow Said*, where Kroetsch takes the central metaphor of frozen forms thawing into motion and uses it as a means of linking narrative to theory and folk motif to postmodern epistemology. The novel opens with an image of "the meandering river still locked in ice" (7) and Vera Lang (i.e., true language) "[l]ocked into silence" (8). Martin Lang is described as a "frozen corpse . . . locked to the plow" (31); the winter creates "snow-locked farms" (45); and, as noted above, Liebhaber busies himself, early in the novel, with "lock[ing] up the form" of his story. This is a novel full of "frozen forms" (25), "frozen brassieres and bloomers" (26), and, significantly, "frost-strangled lungs" (27).

Father Basil, "his breath freezing in front of his mouth as he spoke from the altar" (51), reports that the "world is out of motion. We inhabit a strangled universe" (52). Father Basil's conviction that "[w]e've got to bust her *loose*!" (52) parallels Kroetsch's own conviction that, unless we break free from old ways of narrating the world, our literature will stay "dumbfounded into an unending winter" (19).

Throughout *What the Crow Said* the seemingly capricious weather variously freezes and thaws world and words, the narrative subtly incorporating an intertextual play upon the notion of words freezing in winter and then tumbling back aloud in the spring. This frozen words motif has gained irregular currency from early Roman times to the present day, and a brief consideration of its presence in oral and written narratives shows both the dialogic nature of Kroetsch's novel and the extent to which the great-given sounds in Kroetsch's unique speaking.

Plutarch first introduced the trope in his discussion of "hearing":

> Antiphanes said merrily that in a certain city the cold was so intense that the words were congealed as soon as spoken, but that after some time they thawed and became audible; so that the words spoken in winter were articulated the next summer. (Bartlett, *Familiar* 137)

The motif is cited by Joseph Addison, attributed to *Mandeville's Travels*, and echoes variously throughout the written texts of Castiglione, Rabelais, Baron Munchausen, Samuel Butler, John Donne, and collections of coffee-house jokes, such as Captain William Hicks' *Coffee-House Jests*.[2] Each of the authors mentioned adopts the frozen words trope for either dramatic or humorous effect. The November 23, 1710 issue of the *Tatler*, for example, treats the phenomenon with documentary realism: speaking of Sir John Mandeville's apocryphal voyages, Addison writes,

> that learned and worthy knight gives an Account of the freezing and thawing of several short speeches which he made in the Territories of *Nova Zembla*. I need not inform my Reader that the author of Hudibras alludes to this strange Quality in that cold Climate, when, speaking of abstracted Notions cloathed in a visible shape, he adds that apt simile
> Like Words Congeal'd in Northern Air. (237)

In the oral tradition, the trope finds a home in travellers' tales, jokes, lies, and tall tales, usually campfire tales about extremes in weather. According to Mody C. Boatright, the flourishing of "liars' tales" and the frozen words motif demonstrates how imported tropes are adapted by an oral culture to confront with humour the awesome forces of nature and a formidable geography. In addition, in the tradition of "loading the greenhorn," such tales perform the social function of gulling an uninitiated member of the community: the greenhorn enters, hears the fantastic story, and returns home, perhaps to retell the story as the "truth." Many of the Paul Bunyan stories illustrate this process:

> The bunkhouses where we slept were so cold that the words froze as soon as the men spoke. The frozen words were thrown in a pile behind the stove, and the men would have to wait until the words thawed out before they knew what was being said. When the men sang, the music froze and the following spring the woods were full of music as odd bits of song gradually thawed out. (McCormick 44-45)

The joke continues as the cowboys and miners feign ignorance of this phenomenon, seeking wisdom from European authorities. In another of the Paul Bunyan frozen words stories, Paul looks to England for a "frozen word interpreter":

> It was so cold that the words froze in our mouths when we tried to talk and Paul had to send to England for a frozen word interpreter. Some of the combinations that come out that spring when they began to thaw out--I tell you, you'd know then what somebody thought of you, all right. (Shephard 100-101)

And displaying a wonderful flair for the intertextual, the following dialogue documented in Boatright's *Tall Tales From Texas* plays off literary trope against oral narrative:

> "Speakin' of things freezin', said Red, "I've seen words freeze. Once we was out in a blizzard cuttin' drift fences, and tryin' to point the herds to the canyons. And we'd yell and cuss the critters, but we couldn't even hear ourselves. Well, sir, we finally got the brutes into the brakes and was on our way back when it started moderatin'. All of a sudden we heard the dangest mess of yellin' and cussin' and cow-bawlin' that you ever heard tell of. Presently we recognized the very words we had spoke on the way down."
>
> "It seems to me," said Lanky, "that I learned a story something like that from Addison and Steele."
>
> "Doubtless," said Red, "doubtless you did. This that I was tellin' you happened right over here on Addison and Steele's outfit. I was workin' for 'em at the time." (50-51)

The motif is no less present in Canadian oral culture. As Edith Fowke notes in her *Tales Told in Canada*, tall tales are especially popular around Canadian campfires: "Many of them describe the fantastic exploits of hunters and fishermen, and others dwell upon our weather, which in reality is extreme enough, and hence lends itself readily to the type of exaggeration characteristic of tall tales" (74). Fowke cites the cold winters and warm summers of northern Ontario as the inspiration for the numerous Canadian variations on the frozen words pattern; but it is Herbert Halpert's "Tall Tales and Other Yarns from Calgary, Alberta" that establishes a particularly Albertan context for frozen words. Halpert describes Western Canada as one of the last frontiers: a meeting place for cowmen from the southwestern states, moving through Wyoming and Montana, up the old Fort Benton trail and into southern and western Alberta. He speaks about the chinook winds and their effect upon Calgary temperatures as explaining, in part, the appeal of frozen words stories; and, in addition to offering several more variations, Halpert concludes that as "might be expected most of the folk tales found were carried in from elsewhere, but the majority of them have been thoroughly changed to fit local conditions" (31).[3] The frozen words trope, changed to fit local conditions, has proven irresistible to a number of Canadian postmodernists.

Freezing Life and Language

Images of words, actions, characters, etc., frozen are a commonplace in Canadian literature, and more often than not recent fiction links these images to acts of speaking and storytelling. The images constitute an influential aspect of the postmodern "weather" (the "great-given") that Kroetsch inhabits and to which we respond. The realist tradition, of course, contains numerous classic scenes of characters and dialogue frozen: the opening scenes of Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh* or the closing scene of Sinclair Ross' "The Painted Door," for instance, suggest two of the most dramatic variations; but, more subtly, as Atwood outlines in *Survival*, Canadian fiction and poetry frequently cast nature as "a nasty chilly old woman" (202). Land and woman are equated as "cold, 'Ice-bound,' hard" (211), a threat to men for whom they offer "an 'ugly marriage' in which the bodies of the explorers become one with the land by being frozen into it" (201). Images of artists petrified, paralyzed, and frozen occupy central positions in the work of writers as varied as Ernest Buckler, Mordecai Richler, P.K. Page, Sinclair Ross, Morley Callaghan, and Alice Munro, among others. The natural world is said to victimize characters, and, again as Atwood notes,

> The Canadian author's two favourite 'natural' methods for dispatching his victims are drowning and freezing, drowning being preferred by poets--probably because it can be used as a metaphor for a descent into the unconscious--and freezing by prose writers. (55)

Postmodern writers, on the other hand, tend to employ references to freezing as a way of exploring and constructing world view rather than plot.

For Bowering, stasis and static images that freeze the moment are the figments of a realist imagination. Experience and knowledge are not facts that, as Captain Vancouver would have it, we can order and display objectively; rather in the manner of the European journalist Kesselring, who "[i]n his dispatches . . . often made things up" (*Caprice* 93), realists may claim training "in the art of observation and memory" (95) but even such training cannot guarantee accuracy. Where Kesselring attempts to capture history in his prose dispatches, the photographer Archie Minjus shapes the images that lure easterners and immigrants to the developing west. Ironically, "[e]verytime [Minjus] opened his lens upon a sun-silvered prospector's sluice with tumbleweeds piled against it, the subject disappeared, leaving its fossil imprint in a Montreal furniture store" (147). His great ambition is "to possess a lens and a film fast enough to stop the water over Deadman Falls" (148), but again he finds that he cannot freeze the moment and keep it "alive": "Every picture he had tried to make of that sudden white spill looked as if a ghost had trailed its shroud through the small opening between the rocks" (148). Similarly, Minjus' photograph of Caprice is "[l]ike a ghost of ice," which seems "enough to deprive her of speech" (149).

As Bowering notes in a critical monograph, "[c]ontinuous change can't be framed" (*Al Purdy* 73); and as both *Burning Water* and *Caprice* illustrate, those who insist on art's power to frame and thus freeze the world end up dumbfounded by the limitations of their own epistemology. Neither stories nor photographs can be frozen as meaningful objects that lie somehow apart from the world. Those that profess objectivity (for themselves or on behalf of their art) are the ones likely to miss the extent to which ideology, history, gender, race, and culture influence what can and cannot be said, written, and read. Kesselring and Minjus' art, after all, does not take place outside the context of colonial expansion and imperialist propaganda: their versions of frontier life are as necessary for colonial conquest as the presence of soldiers and settlers. Photography especially, as Eva-Marie Kröller points out, carried the authority of the new science and technology, and photographers selected their subjects according to their "service to the Empire":

> [photography] carried the cachet of unassailable truth, and poses and perspectives already entrenched in oil painting were

> newly legitimized. Thus Indians were photographed projecting "the kind of dignity one was expected to show in the ceremonial meetings and the photographs" ([*Caprice*] 56), not taking into account that pose and costume might in fact violate the Indians' codes of self-representation . . . . (*Visual Strategies* 167)

Despite evidence to the contrary, both author and photographer assume that the New World can be documented and made subject according to the conventions and values of a European perspective. The pen becomes a kind of "loading pen" (*Caprice* 252), entrapping images, like cattle, for European markets.[4]

The problem of freezing life and language into a fixed form continues as an important concern for Atwood as well. Sherrill Grace argues that the "power of art to freeze life" has been an ongoing preoccupation for Atwood, a preoccupation that lends itself to a "fundamental dilemma that Atwood has not yet resolved: by its very nature the printed word on the page, the poem, stops life. How can a writer capture the processes of life in [her] art?" (*Violent* 77). Words frozen into art are seen as offering a static, artificial separation from the ebb and flow of human discourse. Linda Hutcheon, following Grace's lead, offers some specific examples of Atwood's fascination with things frozen: discussing *The Edible Woman* and Marian's chilling of the cake before it is iced, Hutcheon says,

> The punning play on 'icing' here recalls a recurring motif in Atwood's verse that links the stasis of ice to that of art, a connection amusingly spoofed in the Canadian 'con-create art' (squashed frozen animals) in *Lady Oracle*. Atwood's self-consciousness of herself as an artist who unavoidably transforms process into product is manifest in her fascination with such processes as those of water turning to ice, of living beings into fossils. ("From Poetic" 20)

However, unlike Grace, Hutcheon seems to recognize the process of reading as a means of thawing the printed word:

> The reader of Atwood's novels can never be passive; he must accept responsibility for the world he too is bringing to life by his act of reading. The answer to the static "carven word" is the reading process that mirrors the dynamic creative act of the writer. (30)

Curiously, Hutcheon does not go on to question the objective status of the "carven words"; she does not explore the implications of assigning readers "responsibility"; and she does not posit a reconsideration of the process of reading as a long-term resolution to the frozen words "dilemma." Instead she seems to regard the creativity of reader and writer as little more than a theme embedded *in* the text. But then Hutcheon's focus is on textual poetics, not rhetoric; she looks at form, not the conditions that make form visible, and thus she has little interest in treating the apparent paradox of frozen words as anything other than a poetic trope. Accordingly, Hutcheon argues in *The Canadian Postmodern* that contemporary Canadian novelists are locked into "an unresolved and unresolvable dialectic between the written and the oral, or, as we have seen, more generally, between the static and the dynamic . . . (53). If, however, we reconsider the autonomy of the text and question the realist proposition that meaning can exist in a fixed and static form, then the apparent paradox of "dynamic stasis" proves a misreading of postmodern rhetoric. From a rhetorical perspective, all discourse, written or spoken, needs a social context before it can be perceived as meaningful. Discourse is not a product produced but a process entered into, and the notion of freezing the signifier (or the signified) remains inconsistent with a rhetoric of reading. As Atwood says in her collection of prose poems, *Murder in the Dark*, the page only *seems* solid and we continue to regard it as solid at our own peril. As I noted at the outset of this chapter, the page only appears blank and innocent. The page is "A snowfall, *a glacier*," white "as wedding dresses,/ rare whales, seagulls, angels, *ice* and death" (44; emphasis added):

> The question about the page is: what is beneath it? It seems to have only two dimensions, you can pick it up and turn it over and the back is the same as the front. Nothing, you say, disappointed.
>
> But you were looking in the wrong place, you were looking *on the back* instead of *beneath*. *Beneath the page* is another story. Beneath the page is a story. Beneath the page is everything that has ever happened, most of which you would rather not hear about. (45)

"If you decide to enter the page," Atwood advises, "take a knife and some matches,/and something that will float" (45). Words, then, like the page on which they are written, only *seem* frozen; rhetorically speaking, they are in a state of continual thaw.

Reading Kroetsch's New Orality

The contemporary fascination with words frozen and thawed suggests an ironic reevaluation of the Gutenberg legacy and the assumed permanence of the written word. Where once the frozen words motif provided a staple resource for liars' stories and travellers' tales, it now becomes an integral metaphor for our new understanding of the text as a fluid process of social interaction among author, text, and reader--a provocative variation on a theme whose genealogy can be traced back to Plutarch. Kroetsch, therefore, is not alone in his suspicion of fixed form and his desire to "bust her loose." Moreover, by blurring distinctions between the ontological status of oral and written discourse, Kroetsch challenges the "programmed rejection of the old oral, mobile, warm, personally interactive lifeworld of oral culture," that, as Walter Ong argues, underlies Plato's "entire epistemology" (*Orality* 80) and still influences realist thought.

Kroetsch's orality implies an alternative postmodern epistemology, stressing concern for social interaction, conversation, and, above all else, the processes through which meaning is constructed. A turn to what we regard as the conventions of oral culture--performance, spontaneity, parataxis--implicitly challenges the adequacy of realist theories of reading and readers, for, logically, in order to deny Kroetsch's position, realists must put forward their own conception of the reading process. The critical failure to move beyond notions of meaning contained in the text, and of reading as decoding, speaks to the difficulty of breaking with old theories and practices. The old metaphors of structuralist poetics need to make room for those of a postmodern rhetoric, and Kroetsch's adaptation of the frozen words motif offers a uniquely rhetorical critique of a world view that regards words as ontologically self-sufficient, permanent, and objectively meaningful.

Like John Skandl's response to the apparent chaos and unending winter of his world, the realist is tempted to impose meaning prematurely, to fix reality in familiar and ostensibly static forms. "Ice," we are told, "was the only thing in the world that Skandl really understood" (45), and finding himself in need of an epistemological "center" (45), he constructs a tower of ice as "a beacon, a fixed point in the endless winter" (33). Perhaps the ultimate image of frozen words, this modern day tower of Babel, built amidst the "babble and chaos of voices" (49), signifies the desire to control reality through the language of fixed forms. Kathleen Wall calls Skandl a "[p]re-deconstructionalist man, [who] believes his phallic signifier is transparent, its meaning utterly clear" (92). The attempt to impose order and freeze meaning proves "a sterile proceeding . . . one that the earth eventually defies by sending spring thaw" (Wall 92).

Rival images of "order," such as the frozen tableau of Martin Lang ploughing the snow, provide both inspiration and uncanny competition for Skandl's tower of ice. Lang's frozen form presents a parody of the realist ideal: a perfect example of representational art captured without the creating hand of an author. Skandl cannot tolerate such meaningless form and thus frees Lang violently, smashing at the frozen legs with a hammer (32).

Ironically, before his frozen corpse can be thawed for burial, Lang is lost, only to return as a spirit haunting the other characters during periods of spring thaw.[5]

All attempts to freeze form are undone by the subversion of motion. The ice tower is literally undercut by moving water, "a strip of black water" (58) that sends blocks of ice plummeting down. The comfortable rules and order of an ice hockey game give way to the chaos of Gladys Lang's impregnation by "Everybody" (75) on the ice. And even the frozen river eventually thaws, creating Liebhaber's "terrible flood" (154) and the terrible collision at the centre piling of the old CN bridge. At that moment, creation and motion converge, and Marvin Straw finds himself participating "in an act of creation born of the water itself," finds that he has "invented motion itself" (201).

Liebhaber too seeks to merge water and creation: in an effort to end the drought and make it rain, he fires packages of bees from a cannon to "fertilize the barren sky" (182). As Peter Thomas notes, the bees that rape Vera suggest "a typical Kroetschian pun on Bee-ing and Bee-coming" (103); but, to continue the pun, the bees are also "letters," a kind of naturalist's answer to Gutenberg's movable type. Their return in the hailstorm that follows suggests a final, quite wonderful variation on the frozen words (frozen letters) motif:

> Lumps of ice, some of them the size of baseballs, hurtled from the sky. Often, inside a huge hailstone, was a bee, frozen into perfect stillness, magnified by the convexity of the encasing ice. (193)

In keeping with the pattern of words and forms thawing into conversation or motion, we are told shortly thereafter that "[w]ord spread slowly through the rain-soaked town . . . " (196).

I do not want the foregoing discussion of a particular pattern to suggest that the "meaning" of the story has been finally pinned down. The true story of *What the Crow Said*, like the true story of Big Indian and its inhabitants, or the true story of Kroetsch's rhetoric of reading, simply does not exist as anything other than a *heteroglossia* of competing realities.

Indeed, the story of critical response to Kroetsch's novel resembles that of the townsfolk trying to assert meaning over their lives. Whether the causes of the town's misfortunes and developments are blamed on the bees, the ice, Vera's Boy, the weather, the wind, the crow, or Gutenberg, no single interpretation dominates or can be said to offer a coherent and definitive explanation of events. Similarly, the shape of critical response depends upon the critic's sense of what motivates the text. From a rhetorical perspective, one sensitive to questions of process and product, for example, the one pervasive and significant pattern is the narrative movement from stasis to motion. Motion and the denial of fixed forms is understandably more attractive to those who share Father Basil's conviction that "[w]e've got to bust her loose." Basil's manifesto, though, is no recipe for anarchy. Like Kroetsch's aesthetic position, Basil's conclusion reflects both intense theoretical inquiry and a commitment to the well-being of the community.

Father Basil recognizes that we cannot freeze the signifier by fixing meaning as a constant centre. Language and thus meaning are in a constant state of flux, and like the frozen river breaking up in a spring thaw, a text needs help to "bust her loose." Despite the ostensible futility of searching for absolute meaning, Basil does not shy away from interpreting and theorizing. Like us, the characters of Big Indian may not be privy to absolute truth, but they still need to offer interpretations that make life meaningful. Basil, for example, "knows" that, in his role as minister to the community, he must advocate a model of theology and ritual; Skandl knows ice, its aesthetic and its economic importance; Isador Heck and Jerry Lapanne's bird's eye view of the world allows them an enhanced perspective and a sense that they know the truth; and Liebhaber experiments with an extraordinary variety of epistemological stances.[6] It is all too easy to dismiss such characters and their antics as inconsequential non sequiturs. They can and should be read, however, as ironically realistic illustrations of Kroetsch's argument about the limits of knowledge and the process of making meaning. Like the men playing schmier, men who "knew there was no meaning anywhere in the world" (*What* 94), the absence of absolute truth does not prevent us from making life meaningful. As Liebhaber discovers when he attempts to compose and print "absolutely true accounts of events" (67) by creating only one copy of each story--a copy not distributed to the rest of the community and thus not vulnerable to contradiction--"truth" has no inherent meaning. Even the schmier game, though initially absurd and anti-social, *becomes* meaningful as a vehicle of communal resolve: by keeping Marvin Straw, the hangman, playing cards, Liebhaber and the others conspire to save Jerry Lapanne's neck from the noose. Meaning exists only in social context; the "inadequacy of truth" (76), the cause of the schmier game, helps us recognize with Liebhaber that the true folly is to "withdraw from society" (71) and give up on meaning altogether.

Our responsibility as readers is not simply to validate one interpretation, but to reflect upon questions of underlying epistemology and ethics. Ultimately we (characters and critics alike) must turn to question what is at stake in the interpretive choices we make. As I discussed in connection with *The Handmaid's Tale*, questions of interpretive freedom and rhetorical responsibility are a matter of "freedom from" and "freedom to." We can assert freedom from critical reflection and personal responsibility by submerging ourselves in the "great-given." Like Tiddy Lang we can "live for the moment" (203) and, as one critic advises, free ourselves "from the fruitless quest for meaning . . ." (Wall 103). Or, like Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*, we can declare that to "live in the moment . . . is not where [we] want to be" (135). We can profess our freedom to reflect, theorize, and interpret, recognizing all the while that such a response remains always an advocated reality, a rhetorical argument designed to counter the inadequacy of truth. In theory, the Canadian postmodern allows both freedom from and freedom to; but Kroetsch, like Atwood and Bowering, seems to have more on his mind than advocating interpretive freedom as an escape from social responsibility.

Conclusions

Earlier in this chapter I rehearsed Robert Wilson's contention that we need to test Kroetsch's narrative in terms of its appropriateness (its fit with Albertan reality) and its seriousness of purpose. Wilson himself concludes that the novel, "though occasionally baffling, is a fascinating and instructive achievement" (49); but the fictional techniques and frame of reference, he argues, have more in common with South American literature than prairie fiction. Nonetheless, he maintains that, as an "oblique metaphor upon Albertan culture, reflecting moral and spiritual dilemmas, *What the Crow Said* makes a great deal of sense" (46). Wilson is right to draw comparisons with the magic realist tradition, for as *The Crow Journals*' many references to Gabriel García Márquez attest, magic realist writers have no doubt influenced Kroetsch's work. But as I have tried to show by my focus on the frozen words motif and its oral heritage, there is little in the novel that would be out of place in the tall tales told around a prairie campfire.

In *The Crow Journals*, Kroetsch talks a good deal about the process of conversation through which stories are made and told, and novels are written. He speaks of "Writertalk" (32) with Rudy Wiebe, Lorna Uher, Ken Mitchell, Laurie Ricou, and so many others; and, in the course of describing a party gathering, he reflects upon the "method" of *What the Crow Said*:

> A birthday party for me. Lots of hockey talk. Young Pat McGill is succeeding as a player on the west coast. Comic stories of the violence of the audience, not the players. Cousin Lorne out from the city. Drinking a bit, the men. And swapping stories in a way that once again makes me realize where the method of *What the Crow Said* really comes from. (83)

Recognizing the indigenous orality and "method" of Kroetsch's narrative is important if both author and reader are to escape "the paradigms of other literatures [which] patently and blatantly don't enable us to respond to our weather." For the principle purpose of *What the Crow Said* is not to entrap the reader in a tautological, self-enclosed poetic world, but to offer a new rhetorical perspective on what we normally regard as everyday reality. *What the Crow Said* thus takes us back to where we began this discussion of a rhetoric of reading: to a focus on epistemology and a rhetorical commitment to the metaphor of discourse as conversation. It is in this rhetorical sense that the frozen words (both the motif and the printed text) become meaningful.

The frozen words motif and its variants inhabit *What the Crow Said* as a probable signifier of meaning. Where a poetics might characterize the pattern as simply a feature of the text, a rhetoric of reading obliges us to regard the pattern as significant only so far as it can be brought into relationship with patterns of understanding that lie "outside" the text. That Kroetsch imports a folk motif more commonly found in oral cultures than in written texts seems particularly appropriate given his ongoing desire to break loose from conventional form and the tyranny of the written word. That the motif has, to date, worked virtually invisibly suggests the difficulty inherent in breaking loose from learned habits of reading. My point here is that the motif--and the experience of reading the novel as a whole--only makes sense rhetorically if we view *What the Crow Said* as a point of intersection among interested discourses and discourse communities. It makes no sense, therefore, to speak of a separation between art and life, or even between fact and fiction: as Kroetsch maintains, life is a story we tell. Distinctions can be made, of course. But from a rhetorical perspective, any distinction between fiction and reality is one of degree rather than kind. Ironically, equating art and life in such a manner, far from being a "counterblast to . . . humanism" (Thomas 124), extends ethical responsibilities from life to art and thus refocuses attention on the human element in discourse. This is a new humanism, to be sure. But it may be one closer to "reality" than the conservative critical establishment is as yet ready to allow.

NOTES

[1] The call for "a jail-break/and recreation" comes from Margaret Avison's poem "Snow," and the phrase serves as the title for the final chapter of Atwood's *Survival*.

[2] I am grateful to Edward Pitcher for first alerting me to the frozen words motif. I am also grateful to Glen Huser for sharing with me some of the more obscure references. The frozen words tale appears in Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (155), Butler's *Hudibras* (lines 143-148), Addison's *Tatler* (No. 12, November 23, 1710), and variously in *The Travels of Baron Munchausen*. Grey's annotations to the 1819 edition of *Hudibras* give further examples from Rabelais and John Donne (*Panegyric upon T. Coryat, and his Crudities*). More generally, the frozen words motif is listed in Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* and Baughman's *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America*. Also useful are Fowke and Carpenter's *A Bibliography of Canadian Folklore in English* and Fowke's *Tales Told in Canada*.

[3] It is probably little wonder that such a motif should find its way into contemporary Canadian narrative, and Kroetsch's novel in particular, for the notion of words freezing and thawing brings together critical (Bakhtinian) concepts (of dialogism, polyphony, intertextuality, and carnivalization.) Richard Cavell explains:

> As Bakhtin relates in the sixth chapter of *Rabelais and his World*, Pantagruel's journey to the underworld is modelled on Jacques Cartier's voyage in 1540 to Canada . . . and it is significant that we have the famous scene of the frozen words, of language decontextualized and therefore subject to infinite recontextualization. The horizontal relationship of New World to Old can thus be seen to be directly related to the vertical one of low culture and high, such that the poetics of carnivalization applies as well to this geography of the imagination. (207)

[4] I am indebted to Eva-Marie Kröller for pointing out the importance of the "loading pen": Kröller argues that the "ambiguity of 'loading pen' is surely intended, as it not only refers to the loading pens which channel cattle into boxcars for processing (just as the conclusion of a quest formally channels all the disparate elements into 'resolution'), but also alludes to the potential destructiveness of both guns and pens" (*Visual Strategies* 160).

[5] Many of the ideas expressed in this chapter were first worked out in conversation with my students in my English 420 seminar in Canadian Literature at Cariboo University College in 1990. I am grateful to those students for their active participation and their willingness to share their own insights. In particular, I would like to thank D'Arcy Stainton for suggesting the significance of Martin Lang's frozen form, and Gerry Hewitt for her insistence that we not overlook the "hard core of detail" when reading Kroetsch's text.

[6] Kathleen Wall offers a comprehensive discussion of Liebhaber's various attitudes toward meaning. "Liebhaber," she argues, "is on the way to becoming a post-structuralist, uneasily aware of language's problems, in spite of the fact that, like the post-modern writer, he makes his living/meaning through language" ("What Kroetsch" 94).

CONCLUSION

An important aspect of contemporary response to the changing rhetorical situation is a tendency among critics to extend the precepts of postmodernism to their own critical practice, to present themselves as "readers first" and "authorities second." Elizabeth Freund notes wryly in the introduction to her survey of reader-response criticism that "[i]f one of the conventions of the textual genre in which I am now writing is 'to attempt an objective exposition of significant developments in its field'. . . then it is a convention which puts the writer in a particularly defensive bind, when the impossibility of 'an objective exposition' is precisely the thing which she believes the field adumbrates" (19). The new rhetorical paradigm implicates questions of objectivity and authority, and makes one self-conscious about what Shirley Neuman has called "the tyranny of the critical voice" ("Figuring" 193).

But while such critical self-consciousness may make our claims more modest, it seems unlikely to cut off critical debate altogether. Instead, as the context of reading shifts, the challenge becomes one of finding an appropriate discourse of response. Notions of interpretation dilate to include not only the text but (narcissistically) the process of interpretation itself: all the speculation about reading and reading processes is not a theoretical aside, or, to borrow Derrida's phrase, "the excrement of philosophical essentiality" (*Dissemination* 11), but a legitimate (even necessary) interpretive response to the developing interest and acceptance of postmodern terms of reference. As Stephen Scobie notes of his experience in teaching bpNichol's *The Martyrology*, such a work calls forth a theoretical response--"invites it, and mentions it, and necessitates it" (Fee, "Stephen Scobie" 96). In effect, not theorizing means not "reading" postmodern discourse.

My own "personal struggle" *for* meaning involves an exploration of how authors, texts, and readers interact and construct meaning (however "meaning" may be defined) in an age of postmodernist sensibilities. By highlighting the rhetorical aspect of reading postmodern narrative, I have attempted to impress the need to situate discussion of poetics within a larger but complementary rhetorical context. Reading is no longer a process that we can either take for granted or treat as if it were only a theme inscribed within the text. Canadian postmodernists such as Bowering, Atwood, and Kroetsch, aim at more than a poetics of paradox, for, as this study has explored at some length, postmodern theories of reading advocate an immersion in the social, and thus the rhetorical, world. Further, reflection upon the rhetoric of reading leads us to admit ethical responsibility for the readings we collaborate in creating.

Reading theory cannot go back again to notions of unified subjects or texts, not unless it wishes to ignore the epistemology of postmodernism altogether. But, at the same time, postmodern and deconstructive theories that ask us to adopt the metaphor of the world-as-text and invite us to sit back and enjoy the textual ride simply avoid the political and rhetorical questions of responsibility and advocacy. As Susan Bordo puts it, "the spirit of epistemological *jouissance* . . . obscures the located, limited, inescapably partial, and *always* personally invested nature of human 'story making'" ("Feminism" 144). Once we accept the postmodern critique that all knowing is inhabited by social, political, and personal interest, and that all reading is situated at the point where history, class, race, and gender intersect, we have, in effect, accepted the basic rhetorical proposition that reading and writing involve the "advocacy of realities." Poetics does not help us here, for although it gives us categories to consider, it does not offer a means for reflecting upon how those categories get constructed (and deconstructed). To talk about reading in terms of a poetics assumes a stable frame of reference, one capable of framing the discussion. Postmodernism resists such framing. Only a turn to the rhetorical aspects of reading makes sense in a postmodern age, for only rhetoric (or some world view akin to the rhetorical) can address the question of "how the human knower is to negotiate this infinitely perspectival, destabilized world" (Bordo 142). Simply pointing out that truth is unknowable does not relieve us of the responsibility for negotiating provisional truths, and for acknowledging in what ways the truths we advocate imbricate other interests. As Bordo explains so elegantly, "[r]eality itself may be relentlessly plural and heterogeneous, but human understanding and *interest* cannot be" (qtd. in Nicholson, "Introduction" 9).

Thus we need to ask, with Bowering, Atwood, and Kroetsch, what is at stake in the conceptual metaphors we use and the stories we tell about reading. Such reflection need not be cast as a purely intellectual and aesthetic pursuit: working out an epistemological position and negotiating that position "in conversation" with others *is* a social act with social consequences. Whether regarded as a critique of Cartesian reality, an attack on humanism, or an argument for socially and politically aware interpretation, the narratives advocated by all three writers argue for a rhetoric of reading, one that, given its postmodern terms of reference, cannot locate meaning *in* texts or avoid theorizing how we have come to know the texts as extensions of our shared reality. Readers of postmodern discourse really have no other legitimate rhetorical option. For once we release our grip on an epistemology driven by notions of absolute truth and the autonomous individual, we are left with the rhetorical "reality" that all knowledge is contingent upon an open network of circumstances. That our world remains coherent despite these various and competing discourses speaks to our life-giving capacity to force coherence, to find meaning, and thus engage in a rhetorical exchange of world views. Only by considering this process of rhetorical exchange that we call reading--as this thesis has attempted to do--can we enter into a theoretically aware and ethically legitimate conversation about what is at stake in reading contemporary Canadian narratives.

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Appendix 1

Signature A JOURNAL OF THEORY AND CANADIAN LITERATURE
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August 23, 1991

W.F. Garrett-Petts
Cariboo College
P.O. Box 3010
Kamloops, B.C.
V2C 5N3

Dear W.F. Garrett-Petts:

Signature is pleased to give you copy-right permission to reprint your essay, "Preface to a Rhetoric of Reading Contemporary Canadian Literature," (*Signature* 4, Winter 1990, 13-28) in your Ph.D. dissertation.

Please accept my apologies for the long delay in responding to your request. At this time of the year, we lose the student who is in charge of running the daily affairs of *Signature*. I thought she had dealt with your request before leaving.

Sincerely,

Evelyn Cobley

Evelyn Cobley
Editor